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AUGUST

RANGELAND ROMANCES

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by CLIFF FARRELL

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CLAMOROUS NOVEL OF RANGE WAR AND ROMANCE

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RANGELAND ROMANCES

Volume One **AUGUST, 1935** **Number Three**

A Novel of Love and Range-War

GUN-QUEEN OF TOMBSTONE BASIN . . . . . **By Robert Dale Denver** 6
If Rann Follis would lead Taisie Bonnell's men into battle, if he would help her avenge those three red tombstones on the hill, that was all she would ask of her chosen gun-leader—or of any man!

Two Rangeland Romance Novelettes

CHAMPION OF WANTED MEN . . . . . **By Cliff Farrell** 50
Lonnie Whipple knew that her outlaw lover needed her. She knew that he was wounded, maybe dying—and neither guns nor men nor nature's barriers could keep her from searching for him. . . .

HEARTS COURAGEOUS . . . . . **By George Armin Shaftel** 80
When death seemed to be Mary Barton's only escape, she still held to her pioneer code: To the brave comes victory, to the steadfast comes love—though it be won through a hail of flying bullets and the agony of heartbreak.

Four Western Love Stories

GHOST-TOWN LOVERS . . . . . **By James Routh** 39
Her lover would return, they told her—to die in gunsmoke or stretch a vigilante rope.

THE TRAIL TO HEARTBREAK . . . . . **By Robert E. Mahaffay** 69
Joyce was of that pioneer breed that saw past rocky horizons to the promised land.

BANDIT'S BRIDE . . . . . **By Marguerite Ratcliffe** 102
She owed a debt greater than love to the man who asked her to be his outlaw bride!

DAUGHTER OF FEUD . . . . . **By Lloyd Eric Reeve** 112
Why did Linda Marlin pledge her hand to a man who had sworn to break her?

Rangeland Romances Features

BOOM-CAMP PRIDE . . . . . **Range Rider** 4
Muleshoe Harper and his daughter laughed at the boom-camp's civic pride!

FRONTIER FROLICS . . . . . **By Myrtle Juliette Corey** 122
The day of the Cowboy Tournament was a big event.

PONY EXPRESS . . . . . **Rangeland Romances Readers** 124
A meeting place for those who love the West.

THE OPEN ROAD . . . . . **A Department** 126
When a wandering cowboy met a girl. . . .

Cover by Tom Lovell

Story Illustrations by Don Hewitt, Hamilton Greene and A. Leslie Ross

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BOOM-CAMP PRIDE

WHISKERY old Muleshoe Harper and his daughter, Patsy, carried on their lone-hand feud with the boom-town of Lame Wolf from their tumble-down old whiskey-cabin, squatting on the rocky hillside just beyond the town limits. Muleshoe, as well as his waiflike yellow-haired daughter, were the horrible examples against whom the respectable and righteous of the town turned their wrath. If Muleshoe had once been a renegade and was now stealing cattle, no one had ever caught him at it. If he seemed to have a mysterious source of income, and stayed drunk most of the time, and occasionally entertained guests who were outside the law, only Lame Wolf citizenry seemed to care. But Muleshoe Harper's crime was not a light one. He had openly flaunted and laughed at the civic pride and virtue of the fastest growing boom-camp in the territory.

Then the first citizens passed a ruling that the next time Muleshoe showed in town he should be locked up for vagrancy. Muleshoe laughed at that, and allowed he'd do all his drinking at home. He sent the girl, Patsy, in to bring out supplies when he needed them. It was on one of those trips that she met young Dal Wagner.

Dal's father was mayor of Lame Wolf and bossed the town, and Dal's mother was boss of the mayor. It was too bad that Ma Wagner close-herded the kid every time he came from the Wagner ranch, down in the foothills. She noticed him riding with the slim, wistful little figure on the sway-backed grey of Muleshoe's. Ma Wagner's mouth grew tight; her eyes hard. If the men-folks couldn't settle that Muleshoe Harper outfit, she could—and would!

It was almost a week after she had made that promise to herself that Dal made his first call on Patsy Harper. Old Muleshoe was away, and Dal rode up to the tumble-down old cabin. He found the girl down near the lower forty, a weather-stained, flop-brimmed Stetson shoved back and the wind ripping the corn-colored curls over her forehead. Tears glistened in her eyes, but she smiled when Dal came up.

"Y-You an' ol' Muleshoe are the only friends I've got in the world, Dal," she said in a strangely quiet little voice. "Every time I go in town an' see the kids my own age just sorta look right through me, like I wasn't there, I think of you, an' cheer up. Mebbe if Muleshoe'd let me go to school—"

Dal shook his head. "School ain't so much, kid. As for those others in town—you know ten times as much as they do about the things that count. You can rope as good as I can—almost, an' ride anything with hair. I'd—I'd hate to try to start up an outfit with—"

He broke off, standing in his stirrups, peering toward the cabin. A surry with a fringed top, drawn by a team was making its way into the little ranch yard. Even at that distance he recognized the formidable bulk of his mother at the reins. Mrs. Doctor Jordan was with her, also the preacher's wife.

Patsy Harper swore. She started pulling her saddle gun from its sheath, then let it slip back as they set off at a brisk canter. Dal's heart was pumping when he and Patsy came up to the visitors.

Ma Wagner turned a stony gaze upon the couple. "Girl, what's your name," she asked in a flat tone.

Patsy Harper's lower lip went between her teeth. "It's Patsy," Dal Wagner broke in, hurt and angry. "You know it as well as I do, Ma. What for you botherin' her?"

"Where's your father?" asked Mrs. Wagner, disregarding her son's remark.

"He—he ain't here," Patsy said.

"He ISN'T here," corrected Mrs. Wagner. "You'll learn better English—and manners—at the reformatory!" She smiled. "Seeing that no one would do anything about this deplorable situation up here, I went to the county commissioners myself and got an order to have this girl taken care of. The idea of her staying alone with this—this vile old man. No more fit to bring her up than—"

Patsy's fingers were clenched; her throat full. She took a deep breath. "You!" she burst out. "All so respectable, so satisfied with yourselves. Wantin' to make everybody in the world just like you are. I'd just like to see anyone try to send me to a reformatory, to make me over! Why, even old Muleshoe's worth the herd of you! He wouldn't leave me go if I wanted to. An' I'd rather be dead first!"

"The sheriff is coming up tomorrow," cooed Mrs. Wagner, as if she hadn't heard, "and serve the order on the man Harper. You'll go with him to Allison to a nice school where you'll learn to act like a human being, not like a little animal!"

Patsy Harper's gray eyes were flecked with light. "Damn yuh, I won't go!" she blazed. "I'll shoot that sheriff so full of holes he'll look like a walkin' sieve! I'll—"

Dal Wagner's eyes were clouded. "Now, Patsy," he muttered. "Mebbe it'd be just as well, for a time. You could come back. Mebbe ma's right. She's a hard woman to cross, once her mind's made up. . . ."

The girl turned on him, ripping out the carbine from its boot. "You all roll yore tails off this ranch!" she said, her voice deadly calm. "An' you, too, Dal. I thought I liked you, once. But you just changed all that . . . Git!"

Mrs. Wagner, her double chin up, wheeled the horses around. Dal, a look of pleading in his eyes, tried to say something to the girl, but she stood there like a stone statue.

After a moment he too turned his horse, and started off, following the dust of the surry.

But when fat, easy-going Sheriff Jack Muller alighted in Muleshoe Harper's door-yard, ready to take Patsy to the reform school, Muleshoe met him with a shrug and a grin. "She done lit out yestiddy evenin', Sheriff. Took her bed-roll with her. Reckon she musta heered you was comin' fer her."

Sheriff Muller came from the other end of the county. It wasn't any skin off his nose, either way, unless he could catch Muleshoe in the act of going against the law. So he got back into his rattling buckboard and started back for the county seat. But first he thought he'd stop off and tell Missus Wagner.

For three days Patsy, the girl, hung out in the wooded foothills overlooking the town and Muleshoe's cabin. Once she got so hungry she couldn't stand it, and sneaked down to get some side-meat from his pantry. But it wasn't lack of food which concerned her most. It was Dal Wagner and the memory of his words, advising her to go, to leave the Lame Wolf country where she'd been raised, where every hog-back and stunted pine seemed to have a special meaning for her . . . Dal, the finest human being she'd ever known, had turned traitor. . . . If she could only see him again; talk to him!

There was no moon when a slim, shadowy little figure rode to the ranchyard of Muleshoe's cabin, unsaddled her horse and unloaded the pack animal. Stealthily, silently, she let herslf inside, to her room, to crouch down on the floor, her shoulders shaking with dry, wracking sobs.

She must have slept, for the next thing she heard in the darkness was a pounding on the outer door and the harsh voice of a townsman: "We're givin' yuh a chance tuh saddle up an' ride, Muleshoe, before we set thuh torch tuh this hell-hole!"

And she heard Muleshoe's profanely alcoholic answer: "Torch her an' be damned! The first man that shows hisself gits a dose uh .45 medicine!"

Then a rifle blazed through the darkness from a nearby wooded knoll, and that was the opening of what is still called the Battle of Harper's Cabin, down there in the Lone Wolf country. . . .

A new, fighting light springs in time-faded eyes as the oldsters of the little settlement recount that night's crashing gunfire; how Mayor Wagner's wife, furious at having her plans thwarted, set about to start the men on their midnight gun-trek against the Harpers. How old Muleshoe put up a man-sized battle for his rights; and how the girl, with tears and powder grime staining her face, helped him reload the smoking guns, until old Muleshoe toppled over, cut down by vigilante lead.

Dal Wagner had gone out with his father that night, and with the rest of the men. But Dal's heart was not in the battle, even though he was positive—as were all the attackers—that the slim, wistful-eyed girl was not there. Yet some dread, unspoken warning lashed his mind telling him that Patsy had crept back in the night.

During a lull in the firing, he wormed his way up to the cabin. No sign of life. Cautiously, he peered in between the logs, and barely made out in the dim star-light, the form of old Muleshoe on the floor, and over him a slender sobbing girl. . . .

"Pat—Patsy! It's Dal, honey." He was over the window sill, crashing in the shards of shattered glass that remained in the frame. "Patsy, girl, I've come to take you out—to happiness, to life. . . ."

Almost wearily she stood up, staring him straight in the eyes. "You showed me how little to expect of happiness when you wanted me to go to the reformatory, Dal Wagner. Your mother, your father, and their friends—yes, and even you—showed me something else tonight, by killing old Muleshoe."

Impulsively he reached out and touched her, and she was utterly lifeless to his hand. "There's only one thing for me to do, Dal Wagner. To go away to the reformatory. To make myself like—like they want me to be. Either that—or die. . . ."

Men's footsteps sounded from outside. Dal Wagner stiffened. He saw what he had done by telling the girl that she had better go, that afternoon when the town women had driven up. The memory of those words burned into his mind. He'd been weak, dispicable, in not realizing at once that this girl was worth losing the world for. She—and not the people of his mother's kind—was really alive, colorful, vital and as necessary to him as breathing. He cursed, wheeled as the men came closer through the night.

"Damned if you're going!" he groaned out. "You an' me—we're lightin' out, kid, for new ranges. Where we can draw our breaths and live out our lives in our own way. . . . Look! There's old Muleshoe's cellar. Git down there! I'll stand 'em off till—"

But even as he spoke it was too late. A shout of triumph came from the doorway. "We got th' ol' wolf, but his whelp's still alive! We'll send her tuh jail fer life—"

Dal swept the girl behind him. His gun-butt was cold and hard and sweat-damp in his palm. "Try it," he said in a voice which sounded strange, even to his own ears. "Touch her, an' you die right there. Up with yo're hands!"

A gun crashed in the darkness. A bullet scraped a red burning path on his shoulder. He threw the girl to the floor, squatted before her and, in a moment of insane fury, emptied six shots into the vigilante posse. They fell back, cursing.

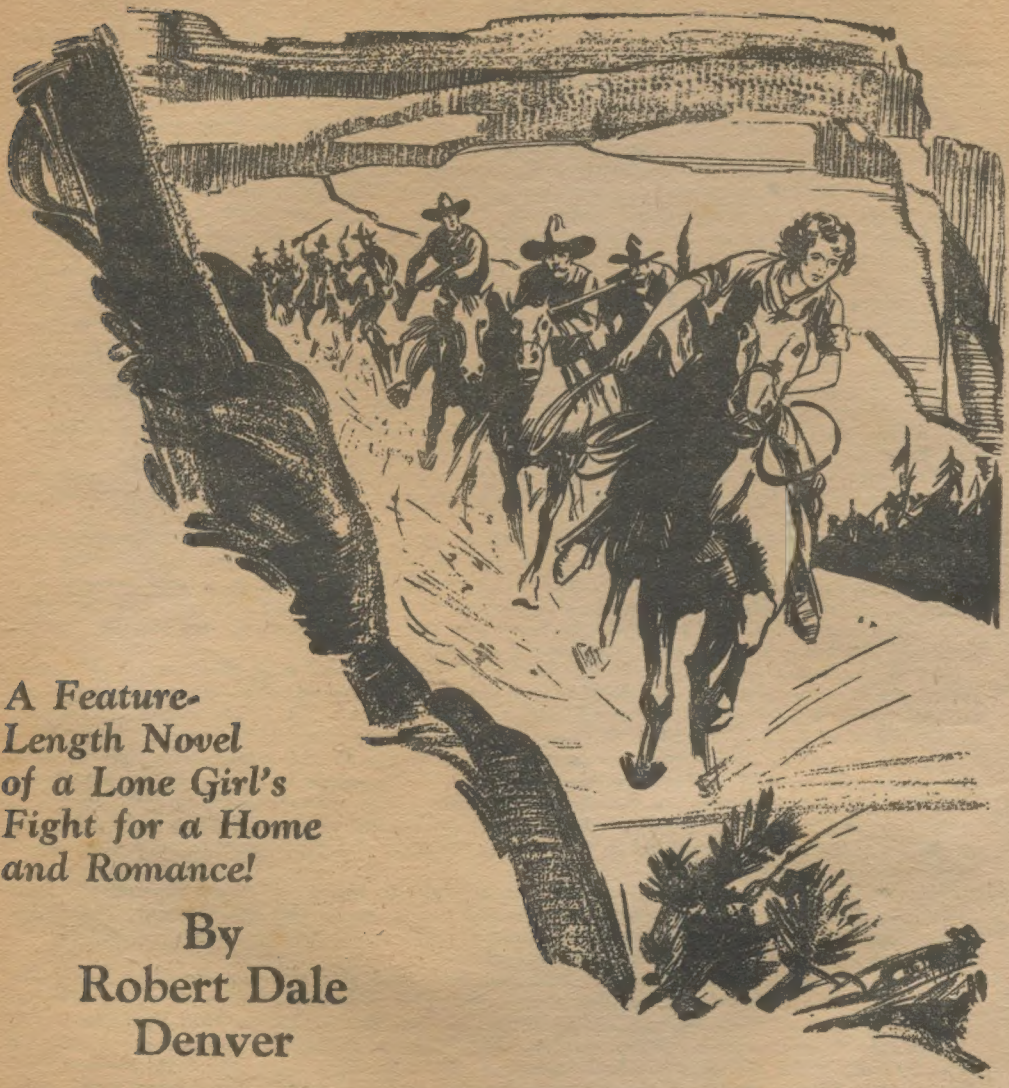
Stooping quickly, he picked up the girl, thrilling to the touch of her hair against his cheek. Even as he was carrying her out the back toward the saddled horses of the posse, his lips were caressing hers. . . .

"We can beat 'em to the Border, kid. Then it'll be just you an' me."

She smiled as she climbed into the kak. "Just you an' me, Dal. Always. . . ."

—RANGE RIDER

GUN-QUEEN OF



A Feature-Length Novel of a Lone Girl's Fight for a Home and Romance!

By Robert Dale Denver

Taisie Bonnell needed gun-punchers and a man with the courage to lead them, for she had declared unending war on all Tombstone Basin. What cared she that her chosen champion happened to be handsome and kind and an advocate of peace? If Rann Follis would lead her men into battle, if he would help her avenge those three red tombstones on the hill, that was all she would ask of him—or of any man!

THE sun had lost most of its white glare and the distant rims of Tombstone Basin had turned to deep purple when Taisie Bonnell slowly climbed the hill opposite the brown-walled ranch-house. That hill was as white with quartz outcrop as though it had been salt-sprinkled, and on it, a few feet apart, stood three blood-red blocks of stone. They were tombstones—and behind each

was a mound of earth. Tombs of the Bonnells!

Here on this bleak white hillside Taisie Bonnell, owner of the Box 7 and last of the Bonnells, had buried her father and her two brothers. Deliberately she had placed the graves and the stones in plain sight of the house where they would constantly remind her of a vengeance that must be exacted.

As if to some slow funeral march the girl climbed until she reached the three graves. She stood beside them then, as rigid as a statue, while a hot little breeze off the desert molded her skirt and waist against her slim body. On her face, tinted by sun and wind, her lips made a straight crimson slash. Within the dark pools of her eyes there was the glow of a fiercely burning inner fire.

Silent, still, the girl stood staring until the stones before her blurred, became a blood-red smear. Even now she could hardly comprehend this hideous calamity, the horrible fact that here lay the three men who had been her all—her father, her brothers, Gray and Stan—killed by the men whom the Bonnells had be-

friended; murdered in cold blood. Taisie had been left alone, so young that until her birthday in two weeks she would not come in control of her property.

For an instant the girl swayed, standing by the long shadows of the tombstones, while a buzzard swung high above her. She swayed again when she ran her fingers over the rough surface of the sandstone blocks, until suddenly, sinking to her knees, she gave way to a fit of sobbing, a racking siege of many minutes.

A long shuddering sigh came from her finally and she raised herself. She had rare beauty, Taisie Bonnell, but under that soft lure lay the character and courage of a Texan family that had brought their longhorn herd into Apache country—and God knows, courage was needed now, more than beauty.

Her lips moved in broken, indistinct words. She was making a vow, taking an oath, to give her life, her energy, everything she owned—to vengeance. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. A life for a life. . . .

Too long she had waited, hiding the suspicions she had felt toward the Dalloners and their kinsmen, the Glones and Bushmasters. From this moment on she must be savage as a tiger, as hard as the flinty quartz on the hill, living for only one thing—revenge!

She must be strong, pitiless, waging war with all the potent weapons given a beautiful woman. She must throw away honor, pity, conscience, if she hoped to win against the odds of the Dalloners—one of whom was her guardian! And she must do it soon. Already that guardian, Logue Dalloner, had disposed of half of her cattle, and even now her crew of riders, under Logue's orders, were rounding up the remainder.

She must forget all feelings of mercy; use others to do what she herself could not. She must hire men to fight for her—gunmen, killers—and above all, a leader for them and the older members of the crew who were loyal to her. She must find a man who could fling a bloody banner across all Tombstone Basin; make its dry arroyos run blood. The Dalloners had given her graves and tears; she must give them the same in return.

Her lips stopped moving and for a moment she stood, arms outstretched, before she sank dry-eyed, shivering, at the foot of the red stones.

It was there that Rincon Miles, oldest of the ancient Box 7 crew, found her when he returned from round-up camp. Old Rincon, who had heard Taisie's first baby cry, who had suffered with her as she wept beside the coffins of the men beneath these mounds.

"War!" she said, as his voice roused her, and Rincon was stricken by the fierce, almost fanatical, light that flamed in the girl's eyes. "This whole Basin will see war, Rincon."

"All of us have been prayin' for yuh to give the word for that, Taisie," said the old rider quietly.

She stood up suddenly, straight, slim, her face as grimly set as if carved in stone. "First of all, I need a man to lead, Rincon. I'm finding one. And tonight, for the last time, at their dance at the Wells, I smile at the Dalloners as if I suspect nothing. I'm going to dance, Rincon, with killers, knowing that they will die to pay for this."

Rincon groaned deep within him, mourning young Taisie Bonnell, whose life had been a gay, light-hearted dream, brought to this . . . .

IT was after dark that night when Taisie Bonnell and Rincon Miles rode into Tombstone Wells. The ugly little group of adobe houses, a store, blacksmith shop, and a schoolhouse, in a clearing of the mesquite was the only community in the Basin. In the schoolhouse which was

used for dances a fiddle was being tuned. Saddled horses and a few teams hitched to buckboards and light wagons were strung along racks on the one street. All of the Dalloners, Bushmasters and Glone families would be in the Wells for the dance.

At the store, Taisie dismounted and went inside to order needed supplies. There was a small barroom at one end; both it and the store were empty except for the owner, one of the Glone family, who came hurrying out of the passageway that led to a back room. He was chuckling.

"I jist took in a big raw-boned stranger to Vic an' the rest," he told Taisie in a half-whisper. "I left the door open so I could hear 'em give that cowboy his marching orders. I bet they jist about scare the fool to death. When I told him our young bucks makes a brag to kill any hombre darin' to go to one o' them fandangoes, he jist laughed. He'll laugh a different tune when Vic talks to him."

Taisie knew which men would be sitting in that room. Every Saturday night Vic, Logue Dalloner—her guardian and a lawyer of sorts—played poker with three relatives: Grat and Turk Glone, and the whip-stocked, beak-nosed Lon Bushmaster. These five were the bosses of Tombstone Basin.

The stranger, standing just inside the doorway of the room, with his back to her, was a young fellow, big, maybe two or three inches over six feet, with muscles hammered flat on his big frame. She had a glimpse of reddish hair beneath his sombrero, and as he turned a little, she saw a rough-hewn but attractive face.

It was the bearded, thick-chested Vic Dalloner who spoke to the stranger. "What yuh doin' here in the Tombstone, cowboy?" he growled, in no mood to waste time from a poker game. Their voices carried easily into the store.

Deliberately the stranger considered the question, then answered evenly: "That might be my own business."

"Not in the Tombstone, it ain't," growled Dalloner. "We don't need no riders for the range work; our women don't need no partners at our dances. In fact, there's a standing offer to kill any stranger attendin' our fandangoes. The Basin belongs to us Dalloners and Bushmasters and Glones. It's plumb closed to strangers, savvy? Git out, and sweat up your horse gittin'. Your deal, Lon," he addressed the man at his right, Lon Bushmaster, most feared of the Basin gunfighters.

The interview was closed. The stranger had been handed his warning. It was no bluff; if he didn't heed it, he would never leave the Basin. His bullet-riddled body would be flung in some arroyo and left there.

FOR a moment the big stranger stood, while the girl watched tensely. Anger was rising in the man, working a ferment that might result in an explosion. But before it came, the play was taken from his hands.

The lean Lon Bushmaster who wore two ivory-handled guns in black holsters, was not dealing as Vic had ordered. Instead, he was staring fixedly at the young fellow, his eyes lingering on the gun that rode at the stranger's left hip, but turned toward the front.

"Your name," said Bushmaster casually, "happen to be Leach?"

"It happens not to be," replied the stranger curtly.

To the left of Vic Dalloner, his brother Logue, dressed in the black garb of a Western small-town lawyer, suddenly hammered the table. "By God, Lon, I see what you're drivin' at!" he said. "He's got Tom Leach's build. Same shade o' red hair and same almond-shaped eyes."

Taisie had heard of Tom Leach—leader

of the Gila River ranchers who twenty years before fought a bloody range war with the Dalloner tribe, sending them fleeing, unfortunately to settle in Tombstone Basin.

"Damned, if there ain't a resemblance!" growled the bearded Vic Dalloner. "He looks exactly like he might be a ghost of Tom Leach, when Tom Leach was goin' under his right name. What was it? Follet? No, Follis. But Leach was killed down on the Gila an' this couldn't be his son. Lucky for him. Well, what's keepin' yuh here, cowboy?" he snarled. "We don't need no extry players in this poker game either. We got only two laws for strangers. Mornin's the law is: 'Don't let the sunset on yuh in the Basin!' Night's it's, 'Don't let the sun rise on yuh.' "

The stranger spoke then curtly, evenly. "I'll think those laws over. And let yuh know if I think they need changin'."

Vic Dalloner scraped back his chair and opened his mouth in an angry bellow.

"Hold on, Vic," said Lon Bushmaster softly. "Let him save his face. Never push a two-legged colt too hard, Vic. They got no sense and he looks jist enough like Tom Leach to be the same kind o' hell-on-wheels Tom was. A bull like him would be a'most certain sure to git one of us here in close quarters 'fore we drug him down. Don't shove him, Vic; let him take his time."

Perhaps this politic talk soothed the ire of the stranger, perhaps it was some other consideration. Without another word, he turned, walked from the room, and down the passageway to the store.

Taisie drew in a deep breath. She had seen enough to know that this big stranger had courage beyond the ordinary. Had he by chance, been thrown in her path, just when she was praying for a leader? She was trembling a little, but inside she was cold, hard with the resolution she had made that afternoon to stop at nothing, to fight in the only way a woman can fight.

THE stranger's spurs jingled into the store, and stopped as their owner, seeing Taisie suddenly, gave a visible start. It *was* startling, meeting in this ugly town a girl like Taisie Bonnell. It was a miracle; the girl's vivid beauty was as out of place here as a jungle orchid growing among the scant cactus of a desert ridge.

The storekeeper had wandered to the end of the room and the door had been shut on the poker players. The two were alone. Carrying out that desperate resolution she had made before the red tombstones of her kinsmen, the girl's red lips parted in a flashing smile and into her dark eyes leaped a provocative challenge.

The stranger watched her smile, while his gray eyes looked inquiringly at her. "Rann Follis, at your service, miss," he introduced himself.

"I overheard what they told you," she remarked lightly. "And so we won't be seeing you in the Basin very long? Too bad that the Dalloners, the Glones and the Bushmasters want to be so exclusive. Too bad, particularly with a dance here tonight."

The stranger's mouth stretched in a wry smile. "So I heard," he remarked. "And I like to dance, too," he drawled, smiling down at her, puzzled, wondering naturally at what this girl was driving. She must know that strangers were not allowed at the Wells dances under threat of death, and yet it seemed that deliberately she was using the lure of her beauty to persuade him to attend.

"I hadn't decided to go," he went on. "And now that I've seen you, it depends on whether you are going or not. And if you do, whether you will promise me a dance."

Taisie Bonnell hesitated. She who a few months before would not have done an unkind thing to anyone, was daring

a man to what might be his death, using the same bait by which sirens and Loreleis of all ages have brought men to disaster.

From the schoolhouse down the street came a lively, galloping Mexican tune. And she could see that her challenge and the music had made the stranger as drunk and as reckless as if he had been drinking all evening at a bar.

She needed desperately a fighter, a man who could pit himself against the strength of the Dalloners. She steeled herself to go on. She had vowed that everything should be subordinated to the red stones' mute call for vengeance. If this man had the nerve to attend the dance and the ability to get himself out of trouble, he was the fighter she wanted to lead her forces in war. It would be a hard test, but a certain one.

A faint flush of scarlet tinged the soft olive of her sun-browned face. "Yes, I am going," she told him steadily. "And if you care to come—or rather if you should happen to have the courage to come to claim it, you may have a dance."

His eyes, steel-gray, held hers. "I wouldn't think of missing that dance," stated Rann Follis. "I'll be dropping around later."

His fingers touched his hat brim, and then he was striding from the store. The faint jingle of his spurs died in the soft dust of the road.

The storekeeper glanced out into the starlit street. A rider passed the door, the big stranger heading out on the trail that led north.

"The big, meek lunkhead," laughed the man. "He sure ain't losin' no time follerin' his nose out o' the Basin."

"I wonder," said Taisie Bonnell quietly.

CHAPTER TWO

The Man Who Can Lead

THERE was a big porch in front of the schoolhouse, with a doorway leading from it into the one large room where the desks had been stacked along the walls. Couples were whirling to the music of the orchestra, made up of three oldish Mexicans, with a fiddle, an accordion and a drum. Taisie Bonnell was not among the dancers. She had refused an invitation from young Lon Bushmaster and was standing along the wall watching the doorway that opened on the porch.

The starlight beyond the porch was blocked off suddenly by a man who stepped up on the porch and strode lithely across it. Fiercely the girl's heart began to pound and then, now that Follis had really come, she was sick. She had brought a man into a trap, in a deliberate test of his courage. And she hated herself for it although the stranger was facing that threat forewarned of the consequences.

Follis took in the room with one sweeping glance. Then his eyes were drawn to the girl, standing opposite him, alone. He circled the dancers, plainly indifferent to the amazement and anger that his coming had caused. His attention was all on the girl.

Taisie swung to meet him, held helpless in the sudden grip of fear, afraid for the stranger as she had never been for herself. It was not yet too late to step back. She could refuse a dance and ask him to go.

He stopped close to her and stood, seeming to tower above her, although Taisie was above the average height of women. "I've come to claim that dance," he said lightly.

Taisie, lost in a mad whirlpool of thoughts, opened her lips to speak, to refuse him. And then her eyes became inscrutable, and smilingly she stepped closer to him, within the circle of his arm. They swung in among the couples just as the music changed to a new tune.

With the shift in music and the en-

trance of the new couple to the floor, the atmosphere of the room changed strangely. The noisy, rowdy crowd was suddenly ominously silent. The air seemed to tingle with menace.

Taisie's smile suddenly froze. A man had come from another room and was standing by the piled-up desks along the side wall. He was a gaudily dressed young fellow whose dark face resembled that of his father. It was Lon Bushmaster. He was one of those suitors which the Dalloners had insisted that Taisie marry within the two weeks remaining before her birthday. Two guns, ivory-handled replicas of his father's pair, rode at young Bushmaster's hips.

He stood, taut, impatiently waiting for the dance to end. His eyes, burning with unleashed fury, never left the couple for a moment. For that matter all the dancers in the room, men and women alike, were glaring at the stranger. They all hung together in the Basin, the Dalloners, Bushmasters and Glones.

The girl was trembling as she danced, and her voice was tremulous as she began speaking in a murmur too low for the other couples to hear.

"They will kill you for this. I was insane to—to—"

"I'm a little loco myself," Rann Follis returned carelessly. "And plumb happy to be that way. Being killed is a cheap price to pay—for a dance with you. I had to see you again, and if you were going to the dance, I figured that it was time for the unwritten law of the Basin against strangers at dances to be done away with."

"But I asked you to come. And they'll be waiting outside for you after this dance is done. That's young Lon Bushmaster standing by the desks. His father was chief gunman for the Dalloners in that Gila River range war. If he doesn't kill you, someone else will. As they have killed others—my father, my brothers."

The music changed abruptly into the last of the block of dances, a waltz almost as slow as a funeral march.

"There's a back door, opening out into the mesquite," Taisie went on with a little nod of her head. "Go out that way. The men will be out front. You must get out of this some way. And I—I must explain," she went on desperately. "My name is Anastasia Bonnell. I own the Box 7 ranch in the north end of the Basin. I was looking for someone to fill a job—"

"Someone with nerve?" he questioned "I think, Miss Anastasia Bonnell, I'd like a chance at that job. Any sort of a job, if it were working for you. I'm camped down near the old Coronado Mine with Powder McKittrick, my foster-father, who has permission from the Dalloners to prospect in the Basin. Seems that they allow prospectors in here to hunt gold on a fifty-fifty basis—you find the mines; the Dalloners take 'em. I'll ride to your ranch tomorrow—tonight, if you wish."

TAISIE'S eyes lit up for that. For a moment she forgot the deadly danger this man was in, that he might never camp anywhere save in the "camps of the saints," as the Mexicans call their cemeteries. For some mysterious reason she was almost happy for a moment.

The orchestra with the primitive beat of its drum boomed loud in their ears. Follis's arm tightened about the girl, and she exulted suddenly in its strength.

Then she got back to being coolly impersonal again, a girl who had to wage war with the only weapons given her.

"If you'll come out tomorrow to the ranch—" she began, and then seeing the frowning face of young Lon Bushmaster, she hesitated. "No, ride on out of the Basin," she said. "I have no right to employ you. You don't understand. There are too many of them. They own all the Basin now except my ranch and the one

Colonel Fortney left. No one can stop them, unless a gunman like that man they said you resembled—Tom Leach."

"Which is plumb queer," said Follis. "That his and my name should be the same. My father fought in that war alongside Tom Leach. I've got to ask Powder about that—"

The orchestra was preparing to stop now, bringing to Taisie the fresh urgency of this man's danger. The girl led for a moment, maneuvering him toward the back door, and putting herself between him and the others. "Out that way," she urged. "Quick! I tell you, they'll be waiting for you in front."

But Follis only smiled. He wasn't running from trouble like a cur with a tin can on him. He held her for a moment after the music quit, looking into her eyes, as if trying to read there what pressure of desperate tragedy had forced her to invite him to the dance.

"Tomorrow morning I'll be over for that job," he promised, and then he turned and walked toward the front door through which Bushmaster and a half a dozen other men had already disappeared.

The girl, dazed, near tears, followed him, wanting to call out, wanting to step in between him and the waiting killers, but she realized that it was all out of her hands. Already he had stepped outside where the half dozen men waited for him on the broad porch, where young Bushmaster stood apart from the rest, at the far end.

Bushmaster's right hand was close to the gun on that hip and he was grinning confidently. The young fellow had been trained by his father to split-second speed in the draw, and he had become the confident kind of killer who is so sure of himself that he likes to grandstand before an audience, to play with a victim before ending him.

The grin was blotted from young Bushmaster's face. "You danced with my girl," he snarled. "And that means one thing in Tombstone Basin. A tombstone for you, fella."

Follis standing poised lightly on the balls of his feet, did not trouble to answer.

Bushmaster spat out a curse as preliminary to the kill which he was confident he could make when he chose.

And at that instant Follis moved, with two long swift steps that took him the full length of the porch.

Bushmaster, expecting if anything a slow clumsy move for a gun by the big stranger, took a step backward while he went for his gun. He was too late. Follis' shoulder struck him full in the chest, sent him sailing through the air and off the porch which was all of three feet above the ground. Follis' lunge, as he had intended, carried him also off the porch.

They landed together, Follis on top. Bushmaster, stunned by the fall and the impact of the heavy body, tried feebly to lift himself. A big hand slapped against his face with a crack like a bullwhacker's whip, and then Follis lifted Bushmaster as if he were a child, his big hands gripping Bushmaster's shirt front and trousers belt, holding him for a moment above Follis' head.

Bushmaster's friends, drawing their guns, were rushing to the edge of the porch. Toward them hurtled the body of the gunman, catapulted by the tremendous strength of the stranger's arms. Sailing broadside to the advancing men, the flying body struck them at the level of their shoulders, with enough force to send them reeling back, and before they could recover, Follis had run down behind the schoolhouse. From the corner of the building his gun spoke once, sending a bullet whistling by.

As he plunged into the mesquite, guns

exploded from the confusion of shouts at the porch, but Taisie knew that the stranger could easily get to safety. There was a steep-banked wash close to the schoolhouse down which he could travel to the horse which she guessd he had had the foresight to hide out in the mesquite.

While the men still shot wildly and ran in a futile pursuit, there came the crash of Follis' big buckskin through a sea of mesquite brush. A long wolf howl floated back.

In her heart Taisie Bonnell exultantly echoed that yell. He had done the impossible; he had escaped. And she had found her gunfighter . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Declaration of War

TAISIE BONNELL'S return ride to her ranch after the attempt to kill Rann Follis was silent and thoughtful. The girl was in a tumult. That which she had held before so strongly—the desire for vengeance—had received a setback by the danger into which she had lured the stranger. Only the fact that he had been nervy and quick-witted had saved his life.

She shivered after she went to bed and it was long before she fell into troubled sleep. Even the morning bringing its warm sunlight to blanket the hills and valleys could not take away the chill—deliberately she had risked a man's life.

At the corrals was a stir of activity. Burge Glone, whom her guardian, Logue Dolloner, had hired as foreman, had returned from a few days' absence intending to rush the job of rounding up the remaining Box 7 cattle. With a few more days' work on the lower benches and scattered hills the Box 7's would be in one huge herd, ready to be offered to some buyer. Taisie had protested to the Dolloners before about the roundup but this morning she protested again to Burge when the foreman came to the house.

"Logue give me his orders," said the foreman, lank, hatchet-faced. "We gotta do a lot of cullin' out. Too many cattle for this range."

"That's a lie," she said. "This range will carry all we have left after the sales Logue has already made."

Glone eyed her with hard agate eyes. "Don't kick up too much," he warned her. "Or—" he suggested as his gaze wandered to the hillside.

"Maybe there might be another tombstone on the hill?" the girl finished. "I would be happy to be there, if I knew there were tombstones likewise for all of you Dalloners."

Glone stared at her, startled by the utter hatred he saw in the girl's eyes. "I believe yuh mean that," he said wonderingly. "That you'd be willing to be killed if all of us could be wiped out at the same time."

Glone stomped across the patio and out through the gate. He was losing valuable time that should be used in getting the crew at work.

From the mesquite fringe to the south a lone rider was jogging, on a big buckskin horse. Taisie's heart leaped as she identified Follis. He had come. She had been feverishly hoping both that he would and that he wouldn't. With him that big cowboy seemed to bring to her a new faith in ultimate victory; seemed to take some of the load from her shoulders.

He rode straight toward the house, while Glone stared questioningly. Not having been at the Wells dance, he had not heard of the newcomer to the Basin.

Then as Follis pulled up, Glone waved his hand toward the nearest rim of the Basin walls. "Travel on, cowboy," he ordered gruffly. "No tramp punchers needed to chouse cows on this spread."

"I'm preferring to hear the boss say that," returned Follis.

"You're hearin' him. I'm boss. And I'm sayin'—"

THE small gate of blue boards in the low adobe wall which made a fourth side for the patio of the U-shaped house creaked open and Taisie stepped out. She intended to ride on roundup that day and had dressed in a man's wool shirt, whipcord breeches and riding boots. Ignoring Glone, she asked Follis to dismount. Follis followed her into the court, floored with flag stones, fringed with small shrubs that grew green and cool against the brown unplastered walls. Birds twittered in cages hung from projecting *vigas*. Here was a little world that was quiet and serene.

Taisie stood for a moment looking from the courtyard. The foreman had started sullenly toward the corrals where the half dozen Box 7 punchers were roping mounts.

"I don't know what you think of me," Taisie said in a low voice, her eyes on the red stones set on the quartz outcrop. "I can guess. But they killed my father and two brothers. The graves are on the hill, yonder."

"They killed them?" he asked. "Who are they?"

"The Dalloners, directly or indirectly," she said. "One of my brothers, Gray, was killed by a gunman stranger, a man that the Dalloners had hired to do the job. A week later my other brother, Stan, and my father were drygulched by a party of eight men. Rincon Miles, Choya Evans, and the other hands working here trailed the eight to one of the Glone ranches and out on the malpais where the trails scattered. We knew who did those murders; everyone does; but nothing has been done about it. My people for three generations have lived in this Basin. A few were killed in Apache raids and fighting rustlers. The graves of those that died fighting are in that grove of sycamores, but those three on the hill were murdered in cold blood."

The girl's dark eyes were lit with somber flames. There was no forgiving or forgetting in Taisie Bonnell.

"I'm left alone," she went on bitterly. "And not being a man, I've got to get revenge the only way I can. I want the Dalloners broken—driven out of here, killed. I don't care what it costs. I've got to take the coward's way—hire my fighting done. I needed as leader the sort who would dare go to a dance at Tombstone Wells."

"The law," Follis suggested, "usually takes care of murders."

"The law doesn't reach Tombstone Basin," she came back. "What there is of law at Dabney, our county seat, is controlled by Logue Dalloner, my guardian. Maybe when I'm of age and managing my own property I can bring in the law. But before then the Dalloners have told me I've got to marry either Pete Dalloner or Lon Bushmaster's son—the one you threw off the porch last night. The Dalloners killed my men folks to get this property; they want a marriage to make sure of it. Just in case I balk at marrying one of the two, they've been rounding up all my cattle, and before I come of age my guardian will sell them all on some fake sale, and I'll never see the money for them. My only chance to fight is to keep my cattle to provide money for war. I told you I had a job. It's as foreman here, to take charge, to finish the roundup and shove all the cattle in a box canyon and hold them there."

"Even if you were able to hold the herd until you were of age, it wouldn't prevent Logue from selling them," Rann pointed out.

"As long as we held them so they

couldn't be taken out of the country, he couldn't make a sale stick. I'd have the courts on him, tieing up the sale, making out a case of fraud. What the Dalloners intend if they have to sell them is to ship them into another state where it would be impossible to get them back again. But once I'm of age, I'll sell cattle to hire gunmen. What I need as I told you is a man like that gunman, Tom Leach, who drove these same Dalloners out of the Gila country."

THE man was silent for a moment as he studied her. Then he said, "I want to explain about Leach. Until last night I never guessed that I was Tom Leach's son. Powder admitted it last night in camp. You see when my father was killed, I was a two-year-old kid. Powder had been dad's close friend, and he took me away and brought me up. I traveled with Powder from Mexico to Canada. I had horses and the open range in my blood, and Powder would pasture me out on a ranch while he did his prospecting. And always I used the name Follis, Rann Follis. Maybe Powder figured if I knew I was the son of Tom Leach, it might turn me towards guns. I dunno.

"And you thought," he went on, "I'd hire out as a gunman? Tom Leach fought for his friends, not for pay."

"I admit that," she said. "I didn't expect you to take the job. I've no right to expect you to do it."

"Wait," he ordered. "I didn't turn it down yet. Let's get it straight first: You figure to haze a young war outa the chutes. A war that may wipe out one or both sides. War with all the trimmings—widows, orphans—"

"Yes," she said. "Widows—orphans—women left alone, as I have been left—except that my father and brothers did nothing to deserve death. War is what I want, and I'll pay for it." The girl's hands were tightly clenched and tears dimmed her eyes as she looked at the red stones on the hill.

Rann Follis still refused to believe that this girl could be so ruthless. "I don't think you know what you're really asking for," he said. "Supposing we gather the rest of your cattle and hold them in this box canyon, and then you put the law to work on these Dalloners? Hire detectives to try to find which are guilty and have them brought to trial. If you'll promise to give the law a real chance, I'll take your foreman job, if you think Tom Leach's son will fill the bill. But I'm warning you: I don't think the same way about killing that Tom Leach did. You see, old Powder's taught me to hate killing, to depend on the law to settle disputes."

"I was taught all that too," said the girl. "But I've shed those teachings. An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth. If there were any other way out of this, God knows I'd take it, but there isn't. If you think you can keep it from war, all right; I'm willing to let you try. You're in charge, Rann Follis, from now on. In place of that man out there, Burge Glone, that Logue Dalloner made foreman."

"Glone ramrodding over here for the Dalloners, is he?" said Rann. "How many more of your men are owned by them?"

"Glone is the only one," she told him. "The rest are old-timers who have worked on this ranch for years, except Tonto, the kid horse wrangler and he's as loyal as any of them. Those old-timers feel as I do about the Dalloners; you can count on them to ride with you, to fight wherever you lead them. And I'll be along with them."

"All right," said Rann, "I take the job." His big hand came out and hers,

warm, soft, met it with a firm clasp. The girl drew a deep breath. She had hired a leader, a gunfighter; the son of Tom Leach.

"As to wages—" she began.

"The wages, we'll settle later," he interrupted. "I might not ask for money."

She looked at him quickly at that, taken aback. His admiration was easy to read. "This is a business proposition," she told him coldly. "That must be understood from the first."

"But has it been altogether a business proposition?" he asked. "It wasn't quite a business proposition for you to dare me to come to the dance last night. But let it be strictly business—for the time being. And the first business of the day is to send Señor Glone on his way rejoicing—well, at least on his way."

HE strode from the little court with its singing birds, and found Glone, who changed his mind about going to the corrals, returning to the house.

"I suppose that girl offered you a job to take charge here," he snarled at Follis. "Forget it. Ride on out, before they freight you out in a box." There was a six-shooter stuck behind the belt of Glone's levis.

Follis strode up close to the man. "Now I'm giving *you* an order," he said. "Cut your string and ride. You're huntin' a new job."

"So you say," sneered the foreman. "No one fires me except Logue Dalloner." His hand began moving down toward his gun as Follis stepped closer. "Damn you, keep back!" he commanded sharply. "Back, or I'll blast a hole through you—"

His hand moved swiftly but not as fast as the giant rider. As Glone's hand gripped the butt of his six-shooter, Rann's big fist smacked square into the point of his thin jaw. Glone, lifted bodily from his feet, sailed backward, fell in a crumpled heap. His gun plopped on the ground beside him.

He tried to speak as he was getting up but only a wordless gibberish came. Groaning, he got to his feet and, holding his jaw, went toward a saddled horse standing at the nearest corral. Stopping there to swathe the lower part of his face in his big bandanna, he mounted and keeping his horse on a walk, struck out across the flat toward Tombstone Wells.

Taisie who had observed this from the house joined Rann and they walked to the corrals where the old-timers were saddling. As they approached, she heard Rincon Miles make a remark.

"My Gawd!" he said. "Damn' if that two-legged pile driver didn't bust Glone's jaw jist like it was a winder pane."

The riders, all old, leather-faced, bearing signs of falls that had twisted and scarred their bodies, came to meet the girl and Rann Follis. Veterans of cattle trails, except for the freckled fifteen-year-old wrangler, Tonto, these men were salty buzz-saws who would ride the red rims of hell for Taisie Bonnell.

"This," Taisie introduced Follis, "is Rann Follis, our new foreman."

"Follis is his name," agreed old Rincon Miles. "But I fought for a while in the Gila River war, alongside Tom Leach who was Sam Follis in Texas before he was put on the wanted list of the Texas Rangers, same as was many a man, good and bad. And you're a'most the livin' copy of Tom Leach."

"You're right," said Rann quietly. "I'm Tom Leach's son. Where do you figure to hold these cattle if you finish with the roundup?"

"Black Canyon," said Taisie promptly. "There's enough feed and water up there to carry 'em two weeks. And there's only one way to drive cattle into or out of that canyon."

"Where we figured to fort up," went

on Rincon Miles. "Throw up some rock walls, dig in and keep dug in until Taisie becomes her own boss. It sounds impossible; it looks impossible, and is impossible. Same way it wasn't possible for Tom Leach to win over the Dalloners down there on the Gila, but he done it."

THEY all looked at Rann Follis, son of a famous gunfighter, weighing him, and accepting him as leader in a desperate cause.

"It all gets down to this," said Taisie Bonnell, "holding the Dalloners off for three or four days until we can finish the roundup and throw the whole herd into Black Canyon."

"There ain't no way o' keepin' the Dalloners tied off," said Rincon. "'Ceptin' if they was to find gold mebbe or a diamond mine or git struck down with smallpox."

Rann grinned. "Your first idea was the best. Finding gold—down in the Caballos where that old Coronado mine operated."

"Can't be done," said Rincon. "There ain't no gold there. A wild-cat company put a stamp mill, figgerin' they had gold, but the vein petered out."

"I got a partner camped down there now," said Rann. "My foster-father, Powder McKittrick. He's been a miner all his life. He could find gold most any place he hunted for it, because he's carryin' around in his packs all of a thousand dollars in high grade ore and gold dust and small nuggets. Maybe he could put it over. These Dalloners know anything about mining or ore?"

"Nothin' 'cept that gold's legal tender for whiskey anywhere," drawled old Choya Evans, saddle mate of Rincon Miles. "All of 'em is too lazy to swing a pick to hunt for their own gold. Ain't one knows enough to pound a rock drill through a tub o' butter."

"Then I figure Powder could scatter enough of the gold to make those knotheads think the whole mountain was veined with it, and enough dust to make 'em think a arroyo over there was a big placer field. I'll ride over to see him and if he falls in with the idea, I'll help him today with the salting and be back with you tomorrow morning early. Meanwhile ride hell-for-leather chousin' your old Box Sevens out of the mesquite.

He and Taisie went back to his horse, with the girl taking two steps to his one. Hope was suddenly high within her. The long weeks of inaction, of masking feelings, was over at last. They were starting something. Maybe a wild scheme, hopeless from the start, but the Dalloners would know they had been in a fight. Rincon and the rest were rarin' to go under this big fellow.

And yet as Rann Follis prepared to mount, a certain doubt clutched at the girl, whispered to her to stop. What right had she to use this man, and Rincon and the rest.

Rann saw the troubled look on her face. "All worrying after this is to be done by me," he scolded. "All that private soldiers in this war do is sleep, eat, work and, if necessary, fight."

The girl made a gesture of sudden hopelessness. "I can't," she wailed, "now that we've started. It isn't right to ask them to fight for me."

"You won't have to ask that kind," he stated. "You couldn't keep 'em out. And remember I'm working to keep out of a war, not to get into one."

"But if it should come to war—You didn't even know by father and brothers."

He faced her, his gray eyes grave. "Taisie Bonnell," he said, "if it comes to war, I'm fighting for you because I love you. I loved you from the time I saw

you on that trail yesterday. If it's war you must have, I'll lead it. I don't favor it. Life is for the living, not for the dead. Powder drummed that into me. I can guess what hell you've gone through here. I want to help you."

And then he went on half-gravely, half-lightly: "But if it comes to war, and we win, I'm going to ask high pay, Miss Bonnell. And I'm warning you now it won't be money. Your ranch couldn't pay the price I'd ask. The only pay I'll accept will be—you."

"I told you," she said, "it was to be strictly business. I said that—" she halted in confusion, drawn to this man, in spite of herself. She was thinking of him not as a hired gunfighter, but as one who might dwarf all other things in her life, even her desire for revenge.

Astonished, she found herself whispering without conscious volition: "If you win, as pay—you can have me!" Then she flushed angrily. "I didn't mean that," she added quickly.

They were hidden from the men at the corrals. Suddenly laughing, he put out his hands and swung her up, lifting her as if she were a child, holding her so that her eyes were level with his.

"A bargain is a bargain," he said. "And I think a Bonnell would be the last person in the world to back out of one."

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunman's Deal

UNDISTURBED by interference from the Dalloners the crew rode out that day on round-up and camped at Indian Springs. Rann Follis had said that on the following morning he would return to the ranch from Powder McKittrick's camp at the Coronado Mine. With the excuse of taking a pack horse home for needed supplies, Taisie rode back to her deserted ranch. She arrived shortly after sunrise, and a little later the big buckskin with his rider came shouldering out of a mist that hung over the basin.

"Mornin', boss," was Rann's greeting as he dismounted and stood smiling down at her. "It's all fixed, boss. Powder McKittrick fell in with the idea of a fake gold strike and set me growing a fine crop of callouses swinging a singlejack in one of those old tunnel shafts. After a few shots o' powder he shot gold into that rock with a scattergun so it looks like a million dollars on the hoof. This morning he's changing some worthless sand into placer pay dirt and this afternoon he's riding over to Tombstone Wells to break the news."

He was so cheerful that he erased the doubts in Taisie's mind. If the Dalloners could be kept off for a while by that fake gold strike, maybe there would be no war. With the cattle in Black Canyon and a small band of fighters determined to hold them there, the Dalloners might back down. They had lost a lot of men down on the Gila, and they should be slow to take on another war.

That hope was enough to bring the radiance in a flood to her pretty face. Rann stood looking down at her, unable to take his eyes from her, and she laughed suddenly, wholeheartedly, for the first time in weeks. Rann had said he loved her and was going to demand as pay—herself. Well, a man was entitled to receive what he had earned, although, she thought, a girl would be poor pay for a man risking his life.

Her happiness was soon clouded. Four riders were coming out of the mist that lay over the basin, Logue and Vic Dalloner, and two others.

"Quick," she told Rann, "we're ready to go to camp. No use waiting for those four."

"Why not?" he inquired. "We surely aren't afraid of 'em."

"But there's four," she said. "That's Vic Dalloner and Logue in the lead. The other pair are men that have been hanging around the Dalloners for five or six months. They're the kind that hire out for killing jobs. We know they were in that ambush on dad and my younger brother."

"An' still there's only four of 'em," said Rann Follis. "Might as well practice up on a few of 'em at a time so that later on we can take on forty or so at a crack. You go into the house and I'll augur with 'em."

But she stood stubbornly by his side waiting, as the quartet angled across to them, led by the heavy-faced Vic, ramrod of the Basin, and his brother, attired in the black clothes and sombrero often adopted by Western lawyers and politicians. As she looked at the pair following the Dalloners, the girl had the sudden hunch that they had been brought along to kill Rann Follis if they got the chance.

"Howdy, Taisie," said Logue as they halted a few feet away. Vic only grunted. The two in the rear, a tall, sandy-whiskered cowboy and a small, dark companion, only grinned.

"I know what you're going to say," the girl addressed the lawyer. "Mr. Follis, this is my guardian, Logue Dalloner. He's going to say that I can't fire one foreman and hire another."

A grim smile spread Follis' wide mouth. "Tell your guardian that he's wasting his time telling you anything like that," he advised. "You've already done your hiring and firing." His eyes went over the four watchfully, his gaze lingering on tall Sandy Whiskers and his small companion who had drawn up their horses a little behind the Dalloners. "And now they been told there is a new foreman," he drawled, "there's no reason why they shouldn't raise dust back where they came from."

"Look here, Taisie!" burst out Logue. "You don't know who you're mixin' with. You heard o' Tom Leach down on the Gila. That Billy-the-Kid-two-gun-killer. Well, it might interest you to know we're sure this is his son."

"I think you're mistaken on that," countered Taisie.

"We're not mistaken—" protested Logue, but the girl waved him to silence.

"I wasn't going to say that you were mistaken about his being the son of Tom Leach," she explained. "He is. I was just going to remark that if he is Tom Leach's son it ought to interest you more than it does me. I've prayed that a man like Tom Leach might ride in. And one has. You needn't worry any more about this ranch, Logue. I'm running it from now on. And as for marrying Pete Dalloner or young Lon Bushmaster, I'd as soon tie up with a rattler or pole cat . . ."

Vic Dalloner opened his big mouth, but Logue cut him short. "We might as well be goin' boys," he said. "This girl has gone crazy. Why, she even thinks we killed her father and brothers."

"I know you did—I don't just think it," said the girl. But Logue had already started his horse, and Vic followed.

A QUICK look passed between the two men behind them. Tall Sandy Whiskers spurred his horse up to Rann. "Tom Leach's son, hey?" he said with a great show of heartiness. "Well, what you know about that? Tom Leach and me trailed cows together up the old Chisholm Trail. I'm sure tickled to meet Tom's son. Put 'er there."

As Sandy Whiskers stretched out his right hand, Taisie noticed that his swarthy little companion was spurring his horse to turn its head in toward the rump of Sandy Whisker's mount. That maneuver Taisie realized would cloak a move for

a gun, and while Sandy Whiskers was shaking hands with Follis, holding Rann's right hand tight, the small man would calmly kill Follis. It was only a new version of that old trick of the West, when a confederate grabs a man's gunhand and holds it helpless.

A warning cry came from her, but Follis' hand was already coming up ready to meet the outstretched hand of Sandy Whiskers.

"Friends of dad's, eh?" Rann was saying softly.

"Rann!" she called. "Rann, look out!" and then she went into action.

She couldn't hope to match the speed of these men in drawing a gun, but she flashed in to make a wild lunge at the head of the small rider's horse, snatching at the bridle in an attempt to scare the animal and spoil his rider's shot. Things were happening fast. The small rider was whipping a six-shooter up over his saddle horn as Taisie flung herself in. Sandy Whiskers who had suggested a handshake made a convulsive grab at Follis' outstretched hand.

But Rann's hand, evading the would-be handshaker, was crossing lighting-like to his left hip for the gun that rode there butt forward. The motion of his hand was like the continuous curving of a popping blacksnake whip, raising the heavy weapon, thumbing back the hammer as the barrel tilted upward; a whiplash sort of draw, and the roar of the gun completed the effect of the popping lash.

The small rider meanwhile, laboring against the handicap of a horse frightened by Taisie, had to twist his body in the saddle to fire at Follis. Even without the girl's quick maneuver, he would have been too late; as it was, he had no chance whatever. Follis' shot hit him dead center, sent blood running down the man's face even before he toppled from the saddle. And the man's single shot completely missed its mark.

Follis had turned to watch the big rider, but there was no fight in Sandy Whiskers; even as his smaller partner's body had plunged toward the ground he flung up his hands, raising them high above his head.

"I wasn't in this!" he shouted in a panic. "I didn't know what he was aimin' to do. I swear I didn't."

Taisie Bonnell had released the bridle on the smaller man's horse, and now stepped back, keeping the left side of her head averted from Follis. The horse stood still, almost over the fallen body of his rider.

Follis' face was grim. Deliberately, while he kept Sandy Whiskers covered, with his left hand he took out a knife, opened the blade, and moved it toward the tall rider. The man shrank away from the knife, but kept his hands up. He was relieved when the razor-sharp blade only sawed through the gun-belt, letting it and the heavy weapon slide to the ground.

"Get down and load him up," ordered Follis and the man dismounted hastily to boost the body of his companion to the saddle and secure it there with the lariat. Then "Git!" ordered Follis and the man "got," leading the horse with the burden of its dead body, and hastening after the Dalloners who, seeing from a distance the failure of their gunman, had loped into the tall mesquite.

TAISIE stood meanwhile saying not a word. The yard, the corrals, the ranch-house with its blue patio gate, the red tombstones on the hill—all were whirling about her, while the blazing white of the day was shadowed with darkness.

She managed to stand erect until she tried to take a step forward. Then she stumbled and would have fallen if Rann

had not caught her in his arms. A little trickle of blood was coming from the dark hair that straggled out in rebellious wisps from below her sombrero. He snatched off the hat and saw a streak of red along her scalp, from which blood was slowly oozing. The shot fired by the gun of the dead man must have creased the girl's head.

Taisie came to after Rann had carried her into the house. She sat up, took the water he brought, and splashed it over her face. Her head was slowly clearing. Rann was muttering that he would get his horse and pursue and kill all three men.

"No," she said. "It was an accident—I mean the man must have been already dead when the shot was fired."

"It was the fault of all of them," growled Rann. "And they'll pay for it, damn 'em. You might have been killed." His face was white with rage; he was at that moment fully capable of what he threatened—following the Dalloner three and dropping them one by one from their saddles.

She caught his arm, "Listen to me," she ordered. "War hasn't started yet, although that dead man out there maybe looks like it. But don't start war; let them begin it!"

Little by little, Rann calmed, then they went back out doors and stood, soberly looking at the splotch of blood left on the ground by the dead man.

"The first fruit from the tree," said Rann. "You wanted war, Taisie. It's come. . . ."

"I wanted a war, maintained the girl after a long breath that nearly broke into a sob. She was trembling, shaken not by the bullet which had come close to ending her, but the horror of that short deadly battle. "I wanted war," she repeated in a voice but little above a whisper. "And I still want war. I want it more than ever. They tried to kill you just as they did dad and Gray and Stan. But I don't want to start it, now!"

His arms still seemed to be about her as she watched him go to the corral to get her horse and the pack mule. She wanted desperately to ask Rann Follis to take her out of this horrible country, but she could not be weak when vengeance waited. They had no chance, no chance at all. The Dalloners had twenty or thirty riders, could hire many more, and probably bring in a sheriff to tin-badge them with the full authority of the law.

Rann was right. Peace, almost at any price, was preferable to war. She knew Rann was riding with her only because he loved her, because he wanted to protect her, hoping to bring her to his way of thinking, to the teachings of Powder McKittrick: "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." But in the same Bible, too, was the: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

She was dry-eyed when he brought up her horse. For the sake of getting vengeance, she had to use even the man she was learning to love. But when his arms went about her before he swung her into the saddle, she clung to him fiercely. Always those two things were battling within her, letting her have no peace—the blood of her kinsmen that must be paid for in blood; the fear that she felt for the man whose own blood might be shed in settling that grim bill. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Devil's Roundup

THE Box 7 roundup was finishing in a whirlwind of activity, sweeping the north end of Tombstone Basin. These lower pastures were a broken semi-desert country with brushy tangles of shallow canyons and bald knobs of hills—a spiny-

clawed, rocky hell for horses and riders.

Rann Follis was leading the Bonnell crew of leather-pounders in the wildest cow-gather the Tombstone had ever seen. Whooping, yelling, taking long circles at the speed found only on horse ranches, they swept the country clear, chousing astonished white-faces down into the flats. These cowboys had gone loco, so those scared cattle must have thought, with their mad rides down slate slopes and across slide rock. They were cleaning up the country of every hoof, throwing them —cow, calves, steers—in with the herd that Burge Glone had ramrodded out of the higher mountains.

They had to make use of every minute; the fact that they were allowed to conduct a roundup at all hung on the narrow thread of Powder McKittrick's fake gold strike, and the hope that he would so continue to dazzle the Dalloners that they would temporarily forget Taisie Bonnell and the Box 7 ranch.

Before the first sign of dawn they were in the saddle and the last streak of light had faded when they quit. They made two and three circles a day, roping and saddling one well-grained mount after another from the remuda which was wrangled by the sliver of a kid, Tonto. A hard-boiled lad, that Tonto, jeering a roper unmercifully if his loop happened to miss a throw in the rope corral that held the milling horses.

A hard-boiled outfit all through, with the foreman Rann Follis, son of the gunman known as Tom Leach, setting the pace, and a tight-lipped girl flinging herself as recklessly as any of them into the spiny jungles or hurtling down slopes that were almost as steep as a well's wall.

A few days of grace would be given them, according to the reports brought them by Tonto who acted as news gatherer. Tonto had slipped into Tombstone Wells the day that Rann killed one of the two gunmen brought out by Vic and Logue Dalloner, on the evening when old Powder McKittrick came racing his paint pony into the settlement shouting hoarsely that he had found gold. A whole mountain of gold! And what was more he had the gold to prove it, ore samples that showed yellow to the naked eye, and something even more impressive, placer gold taken as he claimed from a wash where a recent flood had uncovered wealth which had been passed over by many prospectors.

Word of that strike had spread among the Dalloners like a prairie fire. A mountain of gold was on their range. A vein in the old Coronado worked a foot or two by Powder McKittrick was rich with free gold. There were placers that might contain unlimited food for giant dredges. Wild-eyed, slavering over the prospects of wealth, members of the Dalloner tribe stared at the pouch of placer dust which Powder showed them and squinted greedily at the ore specimens he had brought.

Always the Dalloners had hoped that there was gold in the Basin; that they would see the rebirth of the boom which had started many years before with the finding of a few low grade veins in the Caballos. Riders went from ranch to ranch, shouting the news, and everyone, from the women and children, in buckboards and wagons, to the men on horseback and muleback, the Dalloners, the Glones and the Bushmasters flocked into the Caballos.

TONTO, sent there to report on developments, mingled unnoticed with them, and returning to the roundup camp regaled the riders with his description of the excitement of Vic Dalloner and the others, as Powder with a bland face slyly showed them the gold-sprinkled vein which a few shots of powder had opened up. And then taking them to the wash,

Powder had panned for them gold from worthless sand which he had carefully salted with dust and tiny nuggets.

Never was there a more complete sell. The Dalloners, to the last man, tried their hand at gold panning, or labored awkwardly with picks and dull rock drills, to explore the vein farther. The whole side of the mountain was plastered with their monuments and notices. Forgotten were schemes to secure neighbors' cattle ranches. Compared with a gold strike, the Box 7 ranch and its cattle and the Fortney ranch adjoining, would bring only a handful of pocket change. Even Logue Dalloner, shrewdest of the family, the lawyer who had an office in the county-seat town of Dabney, raced over and apparently built hopes as glittering as the rest.

"It ought to hold them at least three days," said Rann. "Which will be just long enough for us to clean out these lower slopes, push the whole herd into Black Canyon, and fort up."

Taisie Bonnell nodded, her dark eyes glowing with confidence—confidence in this big cowboy who had ridden in to lead a hopeless cause, as his father had done twenty years before. Each evening after dark they rode to the head of Black Canyon and worked until midnight, with shovels and picks preparing their fort, digging trenches, building an outer and inner wall for defense, with a tangle of barbed wire in between. Then they'd ride back to camp to snatch a few hours sleep, before saddling their horses for another hard day. And through it all young Tonto rawhided them, inquiring sarcastically why they didn't get a hump on. Tonto who had had small respect for anyone but his boss, Taisie Bonnell, carressed the butt of his battered old sixgun whenever he looked at Rann Follis. If sometime he could ride through gunsmoke alongside that big hellion, Tonto would die happy.

They hazed three hundred head out of the jumbled thickets of Crazy Horse Canyon. Two hundred fifty more they took from the slopes of the Jinglebob Hills. Nearly four hundred they shoved down on Squaw Flat. With those added to the cattle gathered from the high slopes they were satisfied. Leaving the scattered remnants of Box 7's they trailed straight for Black Canyon. There was no use stretching their luck: the spell which a little prospector had cast over Dalloners wouldn't last long.

Tonto rode over that same day to tell old Powder that his work was done; he was to slip away to join the Bonnell crew.

Powder, Tonto said, had nodded carelessly and had promised to ride over later on. Powder was enjoying himself too much stringing the Dalloners along. Tonto gleefully described Vic Dalloner as running his thick fingers through the coarse yellow particles in a buckskin sack. "Vic had a far-away look in his eyes," said Tonto with a chuckle. "As if he was lookin' at a whole mountain of gold."

But Logue, said Tonto, wasn't saying much. Tonto had overheard the lawyer talking to one of the Glones. Logue, a crook himself, always on guard for trickery, had smelled a rat. But the rest had gone half crazy on hope and the jugs of whiskey which had been brought in to celebrate the strike.

While Tonto had been in camp, Vic's nephew, Pete, one of Taisie's suitors, had returned from a week's absence to report that the Box 7 cattle were being driven into Black Canyon. Jared had seen them as he rode past.

But Vic Dalloner had only laughed. "What of it?" he returned. "There's near two weeks left to look after that girl, and I don't know if we'll even bother. Cattle ranching in this Basin is only a peanut stand business alongside this. The only thing we'll have to do with cows will be to milk a mountain of gold, and we'll have

a bunch of sweatin' greasers to do the milkin' for us."

"I wish Powder would drift over this way pronto," said Rann. "No use of him running any chances."

"He'll be along," said Tonto. "Old Powder, he was havin' the time of his life, foolin' them polecats. He was helpin' 'em empty those jugs of red liquor they got over there, too."

RANN nodded, and they set to work, as the moon rose, putting finishing touches on their "fort." That fort would have to keep out Dalloner attacks for ten days, until Taisie's birthday. It would be a bloody fight, after the Dalloners discovered that they had been tricked. But the Bonnells had water and ammunition; they had two parallel walls with a barbed wire tangle between, all lying between the jaws of upper Black Canyon just where it started to drop into the great trough of the box where the cattle were held. A man could climb out of that canyon below, but not horses or cattle. And as a final precaution they had picketed near the rim of the lower canyon a few horses with saddles hidden in the bush nearby. If it came to the worst, they could retreat, climb out of the canyon and ride out. But it would have to come to something mighty bad before this crew would run.

After two hours of steady work Rann called a halt. They were worn out, with riding, with night work. They drank coffee by the camp fire, and rolled in their blankets, while Taisie and Rann lingered. The two looked at each other across the fire. They had come close in those few hectic days and the fight at the ranch had made a strong bond between them. To the girl it seemed that she had known Rann always. To her he was no longer just a gunman, he was Rann Follis, the bravest man she had ever known, and the kindest. Often he reminded her of that courtly old gentleman, the retired army officer, Colonel Fortney, who had helped the Dalloners establish themselves in the Basin.

"You better roll in," said Rann gently as they sat there by the fire. "I've got to begin giving you orders and making you take them. There was no sense in your riding and working alongside us."

"I had to," she said simply. "You and the others are doing all this for me. The least I can do is share your work and risks."

"There's something I ought to tell you, Taisie," said Rann. "If we win over the Dalloners, it will help me, too. You knew Colonel Fortney, didn't you?"

"I knew him and loved him. He was our nearest neighbor on the east. Had a big ranch over there."

"He was my mother's uncle," Rann told her, then. "He left no other heirs. That ranch belongs to me. You see it wasn't just coincidence that Powder and I came in here. And it wasn't just coincidence that Tom Leach's son should come into the country where the Dalloners had settled. Colonel Fortney from what I've heard kept it a secret that he was uncle of the gunman known as Tom Leach. He was ashamed of what he considered a black sheep nephew, and when the Dalloners fled from the Gila to the Basin, he helped them establish themselves and persuaded your father to help them also. He felt that he was righting a wrong done them by his nephew who drove them from their homes."

"And you haven't even been over to look at your ranch!" exclaimed the girl. "Why, you'll be a neighbor of mine, Rann!" Her voice was jubilant. "It makes it our fight. I'm glad, Rann. When the Colonel died the Dalloners took over the Fortney ranch just as if it belonged to them. But Colonel Fortney had always

said that he wished he had a son to. . ." She flushed suddenly.

"How would a grand-nephew do?" he asked. "I warned you that I was going to claim you when all this was over."

"I'm beginning to think I should have a written contract at that," she confessed. "Rann, you hardly know me."

His arm went about her waist, drew her close to him. "Hardly know you, Taisie?" he repeated. "Why, it's as if I'd known you all my life. Anyway, it seemed that way after I got over the shock—don't laugh, Taisie—it was a shock, meeting someone like you in a desert town without warning. I told Powder when I saw him afterwards that I had gone to Tombstone Wells to dance with you. He wanted to know what you were like—and the nearest thing I could compare you to was a rainbow on a moonlit night and a sunset we saw over the Tetons one time."

The girl laughed merrily and snuggled closer to him. "I like that!" she exclaimed impishly. "Being compared to a sunset and a rainbow. And imagine trying to dance with such a mixture. But you, Rann, I think of you as a mountain, standing out on a plain, a grand, high, majestic mountain, snow-capped—only there is no such thing as red snow. A big mountain that if it wanted to, could crush me and not even know it, but a mountain with too kind a heart to do it."

They sat there quietly, building castles in the leaping flames. Rann forgot that Powder McKittrick had not yet come and might delay still longer, lingering to drink more than was good for him of the Dalloner whiskey. He and Taisie were also more than a little intoxicated with happiness. If their luck only held. . . .

THEIR luck was not holding. In the Caballos fate had been stacking the deck in the strange way it had in Tombstone Basin. As Powder finished his 'steenth toddy by the Dalloner campfire there came a rapid beat of hoofs from the direction of Dabney. A horse swept between the trunks of the giant cacti, churning up a cloud of dust near the fire. Jim Glone, Grat's son, who had lost a forearm in an accident, sat his saddle, leering at the group about the fire.

"You fools," he shouted, "wake up out of your pipe dreams! Logue picked out some specimens that old McKittrick hadn't shotgunned with gold and sent me to the assayer at Dabney with 'em. Hell, they wasn't even a trace of gold in 'em. They ain't no more gold in this mountain than they is in my pocket. You been sold."

"I figgered you was bein' sold," put in Logue Dalloner. "This is all a trick o' that big cowboy, Tom Leach's son. Him and this old coot of a McKittrick was pardners, but didn't come into the Basin together. They pulled this to give Taisie Bonnell time to git them cows rounded up and shoved into that box canyon where they hope to hold 'em until that little she-devil is of age and able to fight us in court."

A dry cackle came from the long, bony throat of the lawyer, but no laughter came from Vic Dalloner and the others. Instead there was a sudden rush after Powder McKittrick who, not too befuddled with whiskey to realize that the jig was up, ran for the nearest saddled horse. He made it, but they were on him at the same moment. Vic Dalloner dragged the old fellow back to the fire where he flung him on the ground. Then cursing savagely, the pack fell on Powder. They had planned to kill him so that he would enjoy none of the wealth he had supposedly discovered, but that did not save him now. Spurs glittered in the firelight as boots rose to thud into old ribs, to smash against Powder's gray-haired head. . . .

TAISIE BONNELL could not sleep, after she went to her bed back in the

brush. She doubted if she ever would be able to go to sleep, she was so tired. Rann was standing guard; she knew that he was worried about Powder's non-arrival; that if his partner did not come in another hour Rann was going to ride across to fetch him back.

She was wondering, under the moonlight that flooded the Basin, if all this struggle was worth it. They had so little chance to win, and odds against Rann Follis were even greater for he would lead the fighting. She could not bear to think of the possibility of losing him, too, after her father and brothers. She had decided a few days before that there would never be room in her heart for love; only for vengeance for those whose graves were marked by the red tombstones. Now, she was ready almost to surrender, to flee the Basin and leave everything to the slim hope that the law might reclaim her property. And only because the man who had been a stranger a few days before might meet disaster.

The beat of distant hoofs put an end to those speculations. Rann was arousing the camp, announcing that a long string of riders was coming down the canyon from the direction of the Caballo mountains.

Taisie slipped on her boots and clothes again and joined Rann who had climbed on a little pinnacle of rock. Rincon Miles, Choya and the others were behind the outer wall, their rifles ready. Judging by the number of riders the whole Dalloner camp must be moving from the site of the supposed gold strike. A string of pack mules was trailing the saddled horses.

They had expected discovery of the trick, of course, but not until after Powder arrived. Possibly he had gone to the rim of Black Canyon, to descend it and come in afoot.

The cavalcade of riders and pack mules had halted at the top of a rise a quarter of a mile from the little fort of the Bonnells. One man came riding toward them, calling to them that he wanted to talk and asking them to give their word to let him return. It was Vic Dalloner, bulking like a short-statured gorilla on his horse.

Follis told him to come on, promising his safe return, but ordering Vic to stay back of the outer wall. Rann did not want Vic to see the snarl of barbed wire they were keeping as a surprise in case of a rush.

"Have it your own way," roared Dalloner, reining up his horse. "It's the last thing you birds will be havin' your own way on. Smart, ain'tcha? Having that old buzzard trick us while you rounded up cows. But he's got to pay for that trick, him or a substitute. We got a proposition to make."

"Spill it," ordered Rann. His worst fears were realized; Powder had been taken prisoner.

"We'll make a trade," called Dalloner. "You for him, young squirt. We were goin' to hang that old bird, but we'd rather string up a young'un in his place."

"Don't you do it," the girl urged Rann at once. "They want to get rid of you; they're afraid of you." Then she called loudly: "We won't trade, Vic! That old man hasn't hurt you. You wouldn't dare hang him."

"Wouldn't we?" returned Dalloner. "Would a sheepman dare hang a sheep-killin' dog? If I hadn't stepped in t'night the boys would of stomped the old jasper to death back there at the mine. Some of 'em would be tickled to skin the old hellion alive, jist to hear him squeal."

"All our rifles are covering you, Vic," the girl pointed out. "We could take you prisoner and make you trade yourself for Powder."

"You give me your word to let me go

back," Dalloner reminded her hastily.

"Tradin' me for Powder," muttered Follis to Taisie. "It's got to be done. That old man looked after me ever since my dad was killed. I got him into this jam; that fake strike was my idea. I'll go."

"No, Rann!" protested Taisie Bonnell. "They'll kill you in a minute."

"I'm not lettin' 'em kill Powder," said Rann quietly. He raised his voice. "What's your arrangement for the trade, Vic?"

"We guarantee to send out McKittrick soon as you ride into our camp," returned Vic.

"We can't trust you," returned Follis. "Send out a man with Powder and I'll ride out to meet 'em half way."

Dalloner hesitated. "We'll do it if you promise to shuck that gun," he said. "I'll ride back and send out a man with Powder, our man to be unarmed, o' course. I'm relyin' on your word. You're Tom Leach's son and Tom Leach once he give his word, never went back on it."

"It's a go," called Follis. "I'll shuck this gun on my hip and ride out."

As if afraid that Follis might back out, Dalloner hastily turned and loped back to his camp.

Taisie turned on Rann. "You can't go, Rann," she exclaimed. "I won't let you. It's not that we need you, although we do. It's for your sake. You sent Powder his notice to ride over here. Instead he got drunk. It was his own fault; there's no call for you to sacrifice yourself."

And then as she saw Rann's set face, she softened. "I realize, Rann," she said, "what you owe him. But I can't give you up—just when I've come to care for you. Don't you see; I can't lose you, too? But there's no use to talk: I know it won't stop you," she went on helplessly. "You're a brave man, Rann Follis. The bravest man I ever knew. There's one way out. I'll quit. I'll offer to let them have the ranch, the cattle. I'll give up all my hope of making them pay for dad an—"

She was crying suddenly, racking sobs, Taisie Bonnell whom Rann had thought had turned to hard steel by the three red stones on the hill.

Gently he swung her down from the pinnacle and held her in his arms. "I'm not just giving myself up without a fight, Taisie. They told me to shuck my belt gun. I'm obeying the letter of the agreement. It happens I carry two irons, one in a shoulder holster. When they come out, I'll have a chance to get Powder and come back."

"But they'll have riflemen ready," she objected. "You'll be in easy range. Some of us could follow you, along the bottom of the cliff, so the Dalloners wouldn't see us."

"Nothing against that in the agreement," chuckled Rann. "I'll take Rincon's lineback dun; he's fast, and you ought to see how small I can make myself when bullets start flying my way."

A yell came from the Dalloner camp to announce that they were ready to make the exchange. Two riders appeared at the top of the little rise and came down the slope toward the Bonnells.

In turn a little later a lone rider emerged from the barricades, to meet the pair. A savage yell came from the Dalloners as they saw the rider. Tom Leach's son whom they feared more than all of the Bonnell crew together was surrendering. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

The Ride of Taisie Bonnell

AS FOLLIS rode along the canyon bottom, Taisie Bonnell, Rincon Miles, and Choya Evans with Tonto tagging them, were stealthily moving through the

dark-shadows under the cliff wall on a course parallel to Rann's. Slipping hurriedly through the brush, the four were able to keep almost abreast of the rider as he advanced to meet the pair advancing from the Dalloner camp.

According to Tonto, the only one among Taisie's group who had seen Powder, one of the pair riding from the camp was actually the old prospector, so the Dalloners at least were fulfilling that part of their bargain. A bandage had been tied around his head, under his sombrero, and even in the moonlight they could see that he sat his saddle with a queer stiffness.

A little fin of rock came out down from the cliff, and the four hastily climbed this to take a survey of the canyon bottom. The two from the Dalloner camp had halted now, waiting for Rann.

"Something mighty funny about that hombre," said Rincon Miles speaking of Powder. "Doggone if it don't make me think of a dead man that's been tied in his saddle and propped up with sticks."

At the same instant they heard a shout from Rann, and the crash of two shots. Rincon Miles' eyes had not played him wrong; Powder McKittrick was dead, and as Rann made this discovery the Dalloner rider who had been sitting so as to cloak Powder from Rann, yelled and raised a gun from behind his saddle to shoot hurriedly at Rann.

When the man's gun came up, Rann flung himself low in the saddle, drawing the gun from his shoulder holster as he dismounted. His shot followed the poorly aimed bullet of the other, striking the man's horse in the head, causing the animal to rear high and fall in a heap. Again his gun roared just as the man who had accompanied the prospector threw himself behind his dead horse. The horse bearing Powder McKittrick's body started on a trot for the Bonnell camp, dragging his reins.

Evidently it had been the Dalloner plan that the rider with McKittrick, failing to kill Rann, should hit the ground, allowing the rifles of a half a dozen Dalloners, hidden in a little brush clump not far from the meeting place, to get Rann. As these guns opened up, Rann whirled his horse to race back to camp.

Taisie's voice came to him then, shouting for him to come toward them. The shadow of the cliff offered better chance to escape than the moonlit canyon bottom.

Rann at once swung his mount, bending low in the saddle. A dozen shots whirred by him, but with Taisie pumping her Winchester and urging Choya, Rincon and Tonto to follow suit, the Dalloner sharpshooters wasted their first bullets.

As another burst of shots came, Follis' horse gave a great lunge and went down. The big rider landed running, dodging along a rock whaleback and plunging through a little thicket of mesquite. Taisie's four were directly ahead of him, all still firing rapidly. As he joined them, they began a hasty retreat.

Rann holstered his empty six-shooter and took the rifle from the girl. As she gave up the gun, Taisie saw that a shot had cut across the ribs on Rann's side. Blood was darkening the shirt.

"Only barked me," said Rann as the girl cried out. He turned, shot rapidly, accurately. "He was dead, Taisie," he muttered as he fired. "The devils killed him. Stomped and kicked him to death, damn 'em."

The girl stared at him in amazement. The big rider's face was a mask of anger: a half-insane light gleamed in his eyes. "The devils killed him," repeated Rann, as he reloaded again. "I'll get them for it—every last one."

"It wasn't your fault, Rann," the girl said as she tugged at his sleeve to make him come with her. They had to retreat to their little fort before the Dalloners

got too close to cut them off. Rifles struck with fanged steel all along the foot of the cliff.

"No, but it was theirs," Rann gritted out. Again and again, he stopped to fire, and there came the yelp of at least one man whom he hit.

AT THE barricades one of the Bonnell crew had run out to catch the horse for which Powder's body had made a grotesque rider. Rann came up just as they were finishing untying the ropes, and took the bruised body of Powder McKittrick in his arms and lay it on a blanket. The Dalloners had washed the blood from Powder's face, but the horrible savagery of the brutes who had killed him was plain to see.

Kneeling by Powder's side, Rann looked down on the man who had been father to him. A thousand trails he and old Powder had ridden together. Since Rann had been big enough to ride, life for them had been one constant drifting from one section of country to another. Since Rann was twelve, he and Powder had been partners rather than foster-father and foster-son; when McKittrick prospected in one place, Rann would be staying on the nearest ranch. His own father could not have been closer than the little old prospector who had preached peace to him. And when he heard of the unexpected legacy of Colonel Fortney's ranch it meant little to Rann except as a home where Powder might "light," in between his prospecting trips.

For a long minute Rann knelt there, until Taisie at last went in to spread a blanket over Powder's face and try to comfort Rann.

"You couldn't help it, Rann," she said simply.

"But *they* could have helped it," he burst out. "They had no call to kill him. They—"

He was interrupted by a wild chorus of yells from the Dalloner camp, followed by the booming thunder of hoofs. Tonto, acting as lookout, shouted shrilly. The Dalloners were charging full speed. Rage over the failure of their trick to rob the Bonnells of their chief warrior had goaded the Dalloners into attempting a sudden attack, one intended to wipe out the few men and the girl.

Rann at once took the lead, shaking himself clear of the shock of Powder's death, grabbing his rifle as he raced to the outer barricade.

"Hold your fire!" he shouted at the Bonnell crew already lined up behind the wall. "Let them get closer. Don't waste your shots now."

They waited while nearer and nearer, with a faint cloud of dust ascending behind them, the riders swept on. The yells increased as they got close; the Dalloners were figuring that terrified by that sudden attack the Bonnells would make little resistance. The horsemen were firing wildly as they came, shooting blindly at the earth and rock wall that rose before them.

Rann let them get within seventy-five yards before he gave the word to open up. Then along the rampart the nine Bonnell guns crackled, taking a terrible toll at the close range. Rincon and his mates were men who had fought off Indian attacks on wagon trains and trail herds, and they could not have been cooler now had they been firing at a target for sport.

Saddles emptied along the line of riders, and horses went down, sending their riders hurtling through the air. The jubilant yells died out as if choked off; the scream of a wounded man and a wounded horse mingled. Then the whole line crumpled and the survivors pivoted and rowelled their horses back to safety. The Dalloners lacked the courage of the immortal Six Hundred. . . .

AS THEY fled, the rifles of the Bonnell crew continued to harry them, to drop horses and riders. No quarter would be expected or given in this battle or those to come.

By the time they had thundered back over the rise, eight or more riders had been dumped from leather. Some of these dragged themselves back; the rest lay where they had fallen. Yet it was no victory for the Bonnells, only a temporary repulse. The very number of Dalloner riders that had swooped down toward them only brought to Taisie Bonnell's mind more strongly the hopelessness of the odds against them. The battle had only started; at night there would be the danger of forays by men creeping up to attack; during the day there would be a ceaseless sniping by sharpshooters stationed in the high cliffs.

Black despair gripped her. She saw that old Rincon was tying up a bullet hole in his leg. Powder lay under his blankets. The front of Rann's shirt was soaked with blood. And this was only the start of what might in the end bring death to all these men whom she regarded as part of her family.

Sick at heart, she went stumbling to Rann, stood before him with bowed head. "I'm seeing it at last," she told him. "Seeing it your way. We can't go on. I'm only sorry that we can't bring Powder back to life. Rann, forgive me for dragging him into this."

"What is there to forgive?" he returned. "Powder and I came in to take possession of the Fortney ranch. We'd have run against this bunch whether you hired me as foreman or not. Our only chance was to join forces with you. No, Taisie, you were right. They want war and the only thing that can stop them is to hand them more war than they hand us. They've got to be broken, licked, wiped out or driven from the Basin, never to come back."

Strangely and ironically it was Rann who had turned to hatred, who would be satisfied with nothing less than payment in full.

"But who is to break them?" she asked. "They've got too many men for us, and they'll bring in still more. We can't hold them back ten days, and you know it, Rann."

"Even if I knew it, which I don't admit," said Rann, "that wouldn't keep us from trying."

Taisie could see that the other men felt as Rann did. Hatred possessed them; nothing she could do or say would turn them. Even Tonto, dancing on top of the barricade, was shouting defiance at the Dalloners, inviting them to come back.

She was up against a stone wall. A man like Rann Follis was as slow to arrive at anger, but when he did, it was an anger that could not be halted.

THERE was a lull in the battle. The Dalloners seemed in no hurry to come back. They were waiting probably for the moon to go down, or perhaps they were sending messengers out to bring in more help.

That night the Bonnells buried Powder McKittrick, a burial such as many men had had here in Tombstone Basin, without book or minister. When it was done, they heaped the grave with stones, and grimly went back to their posts.

When the moon sank they expected an attack and it came. It was no wild charge on horses this time, but a slow crawling advance that took advantage of the meager cover in front of the fort. When the Dalloners had moved up within fifty yards, with spades and picks, they dug in, making a long trench from which their guns hammered away steadily at the beleagured force. Several times they tried a

further advance but the guns flung them back. Once a small party crawled close enough to attempt a rush, but in the starlight the running forms were outlined as targets for rifles and six-shooters. The attack stopped as if shoved back by a giant hand.

And later when the Dalloner guns were silent, Rann Follis, Rincon and Choya Evans went out to make a counter-attack, crawling close to the Dalloner trench. For seconds only the short interchange of shots lasted, then the Dalloners fled wildly back to their first camp.

Follis and his two companions returned, Follis carrying on his back old Rincon with a second bullet in him. Rann, helped by Taisie, probed for the bullet, brought it out and washed out the hole with disinfectant; and Rincon picked up his rifle again. It took more than a couple of slugs to put old Rincon out of a fight. The three said nothing but Taisie afterwards learned that they had shot three or four men in the trench before the rest fled.

The next day was comparatively quiet. They could see more riders straggling in to join the Dalloners, gunmen brought from Dabney and from distant ranches, to aid in the fight. These only made the end more inevitable. One by one the Bonnells would be picked off until the Dalloners could make a final rush to overwhelm the survivors.

Cattle and land weren't worth it. Vengeance wasn't worth that price, but Rann could never be brought to agree to that, nor the others who had ridden so long for the Bonnels that they considered Bonnell trouble as their own.

SLOWLY a plan came to Taisie, what seemed to her the only hope to save these men. Her scheme depended on the fact that the war with the Dalloners in reality went back to the one on the Gila. Tom Leach's son had ridden in to the Tombstone to continue what had been an unfinished war down there.

She went to Rann that night. "If you won't quit, I'm riding out," she declared, "to bring help."

"That's being sensible," said Rann instantly. "You know we've wanted you to go, and leave us men to fight this out. You ride over and protest to the sheriff at Dabney. Maybe you might even get the governor to call out troops," he joked grimly. "Anyway, Taisie, you'll be out of it. One of us will go down canyon with you to help you out over the rim and see you on a horse."

"I don't need any help for that. All of you are needed here to be on guard."

"Then at least you can take Tonto with you," he said. "Women and children don't belong here."

A roar of protest came from Tonto at this. He was in a fight, battling alongside the son of Tom Leach, alongside Rincon, Choya, Tom Davitt, Strube and the others. You couldn't get him out of here, short of hogtying him and packing him out. Tonto told them so indignantly and they had to let him stay. You couldn't squelch the fighting spirit in a kid like Tonto. He, like the rest, Taisie said, had to be saved in spite of himself.

She said good-bye to them and Rann went a little ways with her down the canyon. She could climb out easily, even in the darkness, find one of the picketed horses on the rim and ride. Below, the two stopped for a moment, and Rann's one good arm went about her, held her tight. The other one was bandaged, stiff, swollen from a furrow made by a bullet. She stood on tiptoe to kiss him, and his lips closed down hard on hers.

"You hang and rattle," she said, "until I get back."

"What are you up to?" he inquired. "You sound as if you had a lot of con-

fidence. Remember, if you don't get help, you're to stay away."

"But I'm bringing help. Don't do anything rash, Rann; play it safe. Take no chances. I love you, Rann, too much to lose you—just when I've found you. If anything should happen to you, Rann, I wouldn't want to live."

"That's plumb nonsense," he told her huskily, but his arm crushing her close to him said otherwise. This might be their final good-bye; they might never see each other again.

He lifted her to the horse that she was to ride down canyon. The night was passing and she had no time to lose; it was best for her to be well out of the Basin before daylight, for she might run into Dalloner riders.

TWO hours later she had gained the rim after leaving her horse in the canyon bottom and was saddling one of the picketed mounts. And then she was riding south, but not toward Dabney. She knew there was not the ghost of a chance of getting help from the sheriff or prosecuting attorney. They were afraid to move against the Dalloners. So she was depending on another source for help.

During the last hours before she left, while she had turned her plan over in her mind, she had pumped Rincon Miles who had fought for a time in the Gila war under Tom Leach. From him she had learned the names of all the ranchers who had fought in that war. Most of those men would still be in the Gila country, some of them by now old men, but they would have sons and they would have riders, and in their hearts the memory of the war would still be fresh.

She was pounding out through a pass in the Basin's walls as the sun came up and all morning she rode with the horse on a lope. It was noon when she came to the ranch of Gene Sylvester along the Rio Puerco.

Sylvester, who raised Morgans, was watching a bronc stomper work over a bunch of colts as the girl rode in. He was an old friend of her father's and what she asked for here she would get.

"I want a horse," she said as she swung down. "And a good one."

"That's the only kind I have," said Gene Sylvester as he looked at her mount which showed signs of a long hard ride. "You've rode here from your ranch?" he asked. "Then you forget about wanting a horse. You've done enough riding for one day, young lady. Me or my hand will finish your ride for you."

"No," she refused the offer. "I'm going myself, and I want a good horse."

"All right," he agreed. "I'll give you one, but you come in and have dinner and then you rest a couple hours."

She was impatient at delays but she stayed to eat and to rest an hour, and then she was off on a horse that was the best of those on Gene Sylvester's ranch, a bay with a gait like a rocking chair and a heart as tireless as a steam locomotive. The pony went into a lope after he was properly warmed up and kept it all that afternoon.

Past sundown she pulled in at a ranch whose owner she also knew, and there a fresh mount was provided her. This country was unfamiliar to her and the rancher set her on a trail which would bring her to a big outfit where his son happened to be foreman.

On under the stars, until the moon pushed up over a mountain range, sweeping south, she rode. It was three in the morning before she thundered up to the next dark ranch house.

The foreman dressed, grumbling, and came out with a lantern to see who it was. He was obviously astonished at sight of the girl.

"Not running from a sheriff, be you?" he asked. "So dad sent you down and told you I'd furnish a fresh horse? All we got is a jingler crowbait that would take all day to lope out from under the shade of a cottonwood tree. You take some rest. Come down from the Tombstone? Jiminy, that's a big bite for a girl. Wife will get you a meal, and you sleep until daylight, when the boys will bring in a horse that is a horse."

The girl assented, weary from the steady pounding on three horses, each of which relays would have made more than a fair day's journey.

BUT as the sun pushed up over the horizon, she was swinging south again, with a warm breakfast inside her. They had given her a raw-boned sorrel that, for so big a horse, had an easy gait and could keep it, regardless of hills. The sun was directly overhead when she came to the town of Brigham, on the Gila, where the river had tunnelled a channel through a mountain range. Here they told her the way to the ranch of Lee Bell, who had been one of Tom Leach's fighters. The sorrel pistoned his legs steadily the four miles to the ranch that nestled in a cove below a peak. There an old fellow, with his face a net of fine wrinkles, came out leisurely, then suddenly rushed forward and put up an arm to help the girl from the saddle.

"You've come a mighty long ways, young lady," he said. "That's one of Jim Jelliffe's horses."

"I've come farther than that," responded Taisie wearily. "From Tombstone Basin. You're Lee Bell?" And as he nodded, she went on.

"I've come from Tombstone Basin where the Dalloners located. My name is Bonnell. The Dalloners have taken the Basin the same way they almost took this country—by stealing and killing. And Tom Leach's son is up there fighting them, with half a dozen of my riders helping him. The Dalloners have cornered them and they'll be wiped out if they don't get help." Her voice broke suddenly. "It's the Dalloners, understand? They killed Powder McKittrick, who was foster-father to Tom Leach's son. They killed my brothers and father. And they're trying to steal our ranches. You're not interested in me, but you are in Tom Leach's son. It's his ranch, his life is at stake."

"Tom Leach's son?" questioned the man. "Why, he wasn't a three-year-old when Powder McKittrick took him outa here. Tom Larkin's son, cornered, by them polecats? Tom Leach's boy! We'd of been proud to raise him, give him a ranch when he got growed, but Tom wanted Powder to have him."

He looked at the girl, and glanced toward the corrals where three men were riding in with a bunch of steers. "Them's my sons," he said. "They would of been orphans and had mighty tough sleddin' if it hadn't been for Tom Leach. All of us in here would of lost our ranches and our lives, too, but Tom pulled us through and all the pay he had was a bullet in his heart. It's no more 'n right for us to fight for Tom Leach's son, 'specially agin them Dalloners that we never settled in full for those of us they killed.

"Come a-ridin'!" he bawled at his sons. "Them steers and the buyer that wants 'em will have to wait. Come over here, all of yuh!

"Dick," he told the first to pull up his horse close to his father, "hightail it up to the Clays. Tell 'em we got to ride to Tombstone Basin—startin' this 'evenin'. Tom Leach's son—that was a baby when Leach was killed—needs help bad—agin the Dalloners. You, Clem, ride to Bill Fitton's and have him send word over the Forest Service line to the Estes bunch and

the Naylors and Jiggs Monroe. Tell 'em to bring all the men that ain't afraid to smell powder, and have 'em here before sundown. Stacy," he told the third, "you take word to Stovepipe Creek, three men there was in the old war. And burn the breeze. Tell 'em not to spare their horses; I'll have a messenger ride on ahead to the Tetlow outfit in the Slates tellin' 'em to have a bunch of good horses waitin' for us as relays. And we'll have another relay waitin' for us at the Block A's north o' there. Now git."

As they spurred away he turned to the girl. "So you rode down from the Tombstone, fogging it all the way, I reckon? You go into the house and after wrapping yourself around a meal, pile into bed and sleep until next week. We'll sashay up and look after Tom Leach's boy."

"But I'm going with you," Taisie insisted. "You'll lose time trying to find Black Canyon. I can stick in the saddle and guarantee not to slow you up."

Lee Bell looked at her, drawn, exhausted, and shook his head. "All right, you go with us," he agreed, and then he took her to the house and handed her over to the care of his wife, to feed and put to bed, like a tired child. But Taisie would sleep only after receiving a solemn promise that she would be awakened when the cavalcade rode north.

And then to sink into a dreamless sleep, to get up again, and to ride out with the men, on the long journey north, fording the Gila and cutting across mountain passes that would save many long miles.

Riding with men, whose saddles bore scabbarded rifles, whose belts bore six-shooters. Riding to rescue the son of Tom Leach, all of them, to have a final reckoning on the unpaid score of the Dalloner tribe.

Riding under the stars, and under the moon and sun, changing horses. Taisie counted the men, five, ten, fifteen, seventeen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-one. With this grim breed it would be enough to settle with the Dalloners. . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Last Stand

WHILE sun and stars and moon alternately wheeled across the sky, a handful of desperate men made a desperate stand against odds that grew more overwhelming with each passing hour. Fighting to defend Taisie Bonnell's herd, they battled until all of them were wounded and two of them so badly hurt that they had to lie on their blankets, unable to get into the struggle until the final rush brought the Dalloners into the camp itself.

Men at bay, weary from sleepless hours of watching and almost ceaseless fighting, weak from loss of blood, racked by fever. Men, Rann Follis and the Bonnell crew, who had become ruthless fighting machines. . . .

Twice they had counter-attacked, with Rann leading raids into the Dalloner line, each time throwing the Dalloners into a panic. But the odds were too great; the Dalloners couldn't quit now, when they had Rann Follis ham-strung, cornered. They had to carry this through to the end, to kill Follis as they had killed his father down on the Gila, regardless of what losses they might suffer. And they had suffered a terrible toll already. Young Lon Bushmaster and Pete Dalloner lay dead, with others of the family and their allies.

It was all but over now, however; one concerted rush would end the Bonnell crew which had reached the limit of its strength. Even the surprise of the barbed wire entanglements within the outer wall would check them only temporarily, add a few lives perhaps to the bloody score.

In the Bonnell camp they realized it, Rann, old Rincon, Choya Evans and the rest, although they refused to admit defeat. But Rann, as dusk began to drop down, swore at Tonto and ordered the boy to get back down the canyon, to climb out of it to a horse and ride that horse until the animal dropped. Otherwise the Dalloners would follow and kill him.

The boy had to obey Rann's stern order, and slipped back. The tears were running down his face as he headed down canyon. These men would die here without him, and the rest of his life he'd have the shame of knowing that he had deserted instead of fighting with them to the end. Tonto went fifty yards down the canyon and there hid in the brush. He could go no farther. When he heard the guns announcing the final rush, he would come back.

In camp, the men began quarreling. Choya Evans, lying helpless on his blankets, started it and the other badly wounded man, Cal Strube, joined him.

"You all get out of here, too!" Choya growled. "None of you got any more business here than Tonto had. You can't help Taisie Bonnell none by stayin'. You can't take me and Strube along, and you can't help us none by stickin' here with us. Me and Cal, we'll take care of ourselfs."

"Shut up!" returned Rincon. "We don't leave you here to be butchered by those skunks. Who the hell said we was licked?"

Once before Americans had fought, well and sick and wounded, men lying helpless on cots—wasted by disease and fevered with wounds—against a horde of Santa Anna's Mexicans that, by sheer weight of numbers, were destined to butcher them all, to the last man. That had been at the Alamo, the supreme challenge which fighting men on the American frontier have given death. And these few men here would stay also, those able to go and those who could only wait until their enemies came within range.

TONTO, hiding back in the brush as dusk turned to night, was the first to hear the clatter of boots, approaching from down canyon where the herd of Taisie Bonnell was held. Tonto strained his eyes. The Dalloners, he guessed, must have sent part of their men to attack the Bonnell fort from the rear. Rann would have to be warned of this.

Tonto stood for a moment trying to pierce the near darkness, and then suddenly repressed a whoop of joy. He could not mistake the boyish figure acting as guide for the party that followed her. Taisie Bonnell was bringing help, as she had promised.

Tonto ran forward and in his joy for once he was not ashamed to have a girl's arms go around him.

"Choya and Strube is bad hit," he reported. "Too bad to be moved, and Rann and the rest won't leave 'em. It's the end tonight; the boys can't hold 'em no longer. You come jist in time, Taisie."

"Thank God," said the girl, and she struck out swiftly for camp, with the men following. Tonto, who was hurrying along by her side, turned to count the men she had brought. Gosh, there were around twenty of them, all heavily armed, and looking like real fighters.

And then Taisie was in the fort, going ahead to announce her rescue party, to cry and laugh all at once, there in the arms of Rann Follis, gaunt, whiskered, staggering from weariness.

"I promised I'd bring you help, Rann," she said, "and I have. I brought the men that your father led down on the Gila, and their sons and their cowboys. They've come to help Tom Leach's son finish what they didn't end twenty years ago."

"You rode down all the way to the Gila and back?" asked Rann, and looked down wonderingly at the girl. To make that ride she must have been in the saddle almost continuously since she had left them. Few men could have stood it.

Lee Bell brought in his men and he and Rann and Taisie held a council of war. The Dalloners were certain to attack that night, soon, before the moon rose. Rann's original plan had been to fall back with his few men from the outer barricade when the rush came, and then from the shelter of the inner wall, to fire on the Dalloners as they struggled in the entanglement of barbed wire in a last desperate engagement to trade their lives for as many of the Dalloners as was possible. Rann had prepared bundles of cedar branches which would be set afire when the attack started and flung out into the wire defenses.

It was decided not to change this plan; the Dalloners, ignorant of the arrival of reinforcements, were to be allowed to get past the outer barricade, and then while they struggled with the snarl of wire, the Gila riders and Bonnell crew would pour in a combined, deadly fire.

Already there was a stir of movement in the Dalloner trench, which had by now been advanced close to the outer wall of the little fort. Darkness had shut down.

Without warning the Dalloner guns crashed, and a yelling horde poured from their trench and raced through the darkness. One round of shots was fired by Rann and the remnant of Bonnell crew, then they dropped back, slipping through passages in the wire defense, to the inner wall where the Gila River riders waited.

CLOSE after them followed the Dalloners, stopping only before the wall to reload their guns then they climbed the outer defense for the final rush. But their triumphant yells were choked off abruptly as they came to grief with the snarled wire. Then as they cursed at this surprise, hell burst loose.

"Let 'em have it!" bawled Lee Bell, and the guns of some twenty-five men got into action, while the bundles of cedar boughs were set afire and tossed out into the wire tangle. The crackling flames of these revealed a weird scene, the attackers struggling with the wire, making easy targets. Before the fast, accurate fire of the rifles, the wire-filled space between the walls was suddenly transformed into a slaughter pen, a hellish death trap.

Shocked by the first deadly volley of rifles, the Dalloners fought back for a few moments, failing to realize that the odds in point of numbers had suddenly become nearly equal. While they fought, the rifles of the Gila River riders and Rann's crew continued to strike here and there, with such deadly effect that Taisie turned away, appalled by the slaughter, shutting eyes and ears to the struggles of the wounded men and their cries which rose above the booming of the guns.

One short savage yell burst through the night, and the Gila River men suddenly took the aggressive, leaping over the inner wall, following Rann and old Rincon along the passages through the wire trap. But this was unnecessary; the fight was already over. No men could have stood the surprise of those rifles, fired at close range. A dozen men of the Dalloners called at once that they surrendered. All the fight was out of them.

As suddenly as they had started, the guns ceased. The Gila River riders hastily gathered and disarmed the prisoners, and then moved to bring out the wounded from the wire trap, and after these the dead. Among the latter they found Vic Dalloner, his big body carrying half a dozen bullets. Near him lay his brother, Logue, the lawyer, who had brought up the rear of the rush, expect-

ing that the battle would be ended before he reached the fighting. They found Lon Bushmaster, notorious gunman of the tribe, holding his two ivory-handled guns clutched in his hands.

They made the wounded as comfortable as possible, and sent a rider for a doctor at Dabney to attend the Dalloners and the wounded of the Bonnell crew. The war in Tombstone Basin was over—that war which in reality had started twenty years before down on the Gila.

The remnant of Dalloner survivors would have to accept whatever stern terms were given them: they would have to leave the Basin. Their range would be taken over by Lee Bell and other Gila ranchers until such time as Taisie Bonnell and Rann Follis, heir to the Fortney ranch, could arrange to stock it.

RANN FOLLIS walked with Taisie, out from the little fort where for days and nights they had been cooped with no prospect save ultimate defeat. The moon was pushing up over the canyon wall, the same moon that was to have looked down on a Dalloner triumph.

"It's over," Taisie said. "Those three graves on the hill, I can move them down now with the others in the sycamore grove. They need not be reminders to me any longer."

Rann nodded. There would be peace in the Tombstone, peace won by blood. And Rann Follis and Taisie Bonnell Follis could ride their range unmolested while building up their herd and winning back the Basin that the Bonnells had conquered sixty years before.

The two stood looking at each other, and then Taisie, seeing Rann hold out his arms, forgot all the bloody nightmare of the past weeks. And as he lifted her from the ground to cradle her in his arms, his strength seemed a symbol of the strength of the love he held for her—the love of a stranger who had ridden with her to challenge death and the overwhelming forces of evil. Together they had won, and together on the foundations of their victory they would build a kingdom here in the Tombstone, for their children and their children's children. . . .

THE END

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GHOST-TOWN LOVERS

By James Routh

Her lover would return, they told her; he'd come back to die in gunsmoke or stretch a vigilante rope. Yet she waited, hoping, never dreaming that she'd meet him on that wild and stormy night—a member of the outlaw band that had bushwhacked her father. . . .

RAIN-SOAKED wind screamed like a mad banshee about the empty buildings of the ghost town. Jagged lightning streaked black clouds that seemed almost to rest upon the drenched and streaming earth. The rumble of thunder rose intermittently above the road of Crazy Horse Creek, lifted by the deluge to a higher level than Kate Lorring had ever seen.

The flood, having swept away the bridge, cut her off from the Box L ranch, to which she was returning from Canyon. So she plodded along, head down against the slant of the rain, close to the adobe wall of what, twenty years ago, had been the Las Flores Hotel, hunting for shelter. When she ducked in through the sagging door, the force of the wind was cut off so suddenly it seemed as if she had been released abruptly from the clutch and thrust of powerful hands.

Breathless and none too dry, despite her slicker, Kate jerked her dripping hat from red-gold curls, and peered into the gloomy interior of the old building. The cold seemed to have crept into her bones. But even as she clamped her teeth to keep them from chattering, she wondered if it was chill alone that made her shiver. A queer sense of being spied upon by unseen eyes tautened her nerves. Ghosts? She did not believe in ghosts, no matter how vividly she recalled the stark and primitive drama this place had witnessed, nor how the folk of the countryside avoided Las Flores after dark, and whispered of eerie sounds and lights heard and seen when the moon was dark. No, she did not believe in ghosts. And yet as she stood there a sob rose in her throat.

"Not the ghosts of men," she whispered. "But the ghosts of memories! Bill—Bill darling!"

It seemed to her that she saw again the lean brown face of Bill Desarc as he had looked at her there in that very doorway, and bade her goodbye. Three long years ago that was, but again she seemed to hear the drawl of his deep slow voice.

"I'll come back, Kate! I'll come—if I live—to prove that all they say about me is wrong!"

And her own answer: "I know you will, Bill. I'll wait—always and forever I'll wait for you!"

But in three years he had not returned. Folks said that he'd gone with the wild bunch. Some insisted that he was dead, killed in a fight with Texas rangers, down on the Rio Grande. Kate's father—grim old Sheriff Tom Lorring, who was even now fighting back to health from a long illness induced by outlaws' bullets—held that young Bill had followed in the footsteps of his father and uncles, who had been road agents and highwaymen when Las Flores was booming.

"They was stage robbers an' they was hung by vigilantes," he said. "The boy comes naturally by his habits."

KATE'S lips, white from cold, twisted in bitterness and pain. She turned her thoughts resolutely towards matters more immediately practical. The stove in the lobby was no longer serviceable, but there was a fireplace. She took two forward steps, halted again, stabbed once more by the sense of being spied upon. And then, almost directly behind her, she heard furtive movement. Her slicker swished and she wheeled, and her right hand thrust beneath to grasp the handle of her holstered gun.

"Who's there?" Her voice rose crisply above the scream of the wind and the mutter of thunder.

A chuckle came out of the darkness. "Kinda startled yuh, huh? Well, don't be scared, ma'am!"

Kate did not recognize the voice. It was deep and hollow, peculiarly ghostlike. She held a tight rein on her nerves.

"I'm not scared," she declared sharply. "I'm armed—and I want a look at you! Step out where I can see you."

Again the chuckle came from the murky darkness, disembodied, hard to locate exactly. She jerked her hand forward, gripping her leveled gun, a man-sized forty-five which she carried whenever she rode alone the long trail between Canyon and the Box L. Then a hand, seemingly

as disembodied as the voice and chuckle, reached out of the darkness and twisted the weapon from her fingers before she could pull the trigger.

"Obliged for the warnin'," remarked the hollow voice. "I'll take care of this in case yuh get nervous-like afore we get acquainted."

Kate stood fast against an impulse to wheel and run for it. And then the man materialized out of the darkness. A gaunt giant he appeared, towering so high above her that she had to tilt back her head to look up at him. He chuckled again.

"So! A purty redhead! What might yuh be doin' here, miss?"

"The same as you, I reckon," Kate retorted with some asperity. "Seeking shelter from the storm. And I'll thank you for my gun!"

"Yore iron's safe where it is, ma'am," he said. "Seekin' shelter, huh? It's a cold rain an' a bad wind. Did yuh find the bridge out?"

Kate knew practically everyone who lived in Canyon county, but she had never set eye upon this bony giant before. There seemed to be some special significance in his question. An alarm jangled in her brain.

"I told you I came seeking——"

"Shore. An' yo're shiverin' with cold while we stand here augurin'. Likewise, the chief will want a look at yuh. Walk straight ahead, ma'am. We've got a fire out back—in the kitchen."

As he spoke, his hand closed firmly upon her arm. Again she was prompted to resist and take to flight, but something warned her that escape from this man would be impossible now. She held up her head and walked ahead as he directed her.

THEY went down a long hall and entered a room that was light and warm. A fire roared in a rusty cook stove. Candles dispelled the gloom and combined with the warmth to lend an atmosphere of comfort. Five men sat about a folded blanket engaged at poker, playing with a soiled deck of cards, with gold and silver coins piled in front of them. A sixth man, who appeared to be asleep, lay opposite the stove in a corner where the candle-light did not fall directly upon him.

"A lady pilgrim, chief," said Kate's captor. "Seekin' shelter from the storm. I'm takin' care of her weapon. She come afoot, without no kit."

One of the poker players stood up. Inches shorter than the gaunt giant, there yet was an air of confident authority about him. The flickering light fell upon boldly aquiline features, swarthy skin, a face so cold and bleak that Kate instinctively took a backward step when the jade green eyes swept her searchingly.

"Yo're welcome to share our heat an' grub, ma'am," he said, in a peculiarly droning kind of voice. "My name is Ventry."

Kate gasped and stiffened. For a moment her mind spun dizzily. Sheer and outright terror gripped her, and a kind of flaming anger, too. Hawk Ventry's gang were the men who had shot down her father in a gun battle six months ago, when an attempt at robbing the Canyon bank had been thwarted by the sheriff. Three of the outlaws had been killed, and Ventry subsequently had sent word that the score was by no means evened by the wounding of Tom Lorring. For her to fall into the outlaw's hands——

A curt question steadied her. "What do we call yuh, miss?"

She moved towards the stove, holding out her hands to its warmth. "Kate will do," she contrived to say with affected lightness. "And after I've thawed out a little, how about something to eat? As the gentleman who welcomed me outside told you, I'm traveling light."

She let the dripping slicker fall from

her shoulders and stood before him, slim and tall, yet rounded as a woman should be, with curves and contours that could not be concealed even by her man's attire of overalls and boots and flannel shirt. The candle-light glinted on her touseled red hair, deepened the blueness of her eyes. Ventry looked at her for a moment without speaking.

"We've got grub a-plenty. Mebbe yuh'll cook us a meal when yo're warm." Turning as he spoke, he signaled one of the other men and spoke to Kate's captor. "Better get back outside, Kip."

The bony giant nodded and vanished. Ventry and the other men followed him into the hall. Tension tightened sharply upon Kate. Her horse, with the betraying Box L brand on its flank, was in the old stable down the street. If they found that she would be lost. . . .

She turned away from the stares of the men who remained seated about the folded blanket. She had no illusions about her danger. Another woman undoubtedly would have been treated by these men with the respect that even the most hardened outlaws displayed towards women, but once Hawk Ventry discovered who she was, her quick appraisal of the man assured her that he would not hesitate to use her as a means of vengeance upon her sheriff father.

FOR a few moments the silence in the room was complete. The mutter and roar of the storm outside took on an added tone of menace that played upon the girl's taut nerves. She stared unseeingly at a rusted stove lid, around which ran a ring of red. Subconsciously she was aware of a muttered interchange among the men behind her, of the scratching of a match, of movement. A footstep sounded, and then a man's arm brushed hers and a deep slow voice spoke quietly, almost in her ear.

"I'll give it some more wood, ma'am."

Kate's heart leaped and stood still. She felt herself sway, sealed her lips against the cry that strained against them. Her hand started to lift towards her throat, but she forced it down and held utterly rigid, breathing not at all.

The man's long-fingered hand gripped the stove lifter, raised a lid; another hand thrust wood into the fire. The lid clanked back. Again the man's arm brushed hers, and from the brief contact a glow of warmth leaped through her. Between slow heart beats she looked straight into his clear gray eyes that were set in a lean, firmly chiseled face. Then Bill Desarc moved past her and all that remained was agony and a kind of sick emptiness.

That he should be here with these men was unbelievable. But the meaning of it was plain enough. In his presence she found the explanation of his long-continued silence, understanding of why he had not kept his promise to return. Her father had been right. Gossip had been right. She had been terribly wrong! An outlaw—a rider of the owl hoot trail—a member of Hank Ventry's gang——

"Gettin' thawed out, Kate?"

The drone of Ventry's voice cut through the turmoil of her thoughts. She had not heard him come back into the room, but when she turned he was standing inside the door, observing her with a peculiar glint in his green eyes. A fresh alarm winged through her. It required the full exercise of her will to smile and answer lightly.

"Yes, thanks. And I've been thinking how lucky I was to find company here. Las Flores is a spooky place to stay alone in on a night like this."

"Reckon no spooks will bother yuh," he said drily. "Where did yuh leave yore hoss?"

Her reply was prompt, unhesitating. "Didn't Kip tell you that I came afoot?"

Ventry shrugged. "Yuh mighta misplaced yore critter," he acknowledged. "But howcome yuh was out in this storm? Where was yuh headin'?"

"Home, of course," Kate said quietly.

"Where might that be?"

His insistence made her feel that she was trapped. Then a flare of anger shook her. She tilted up her chin. But as her lips moved to spill out the truth and have done with it, the deep slow drawl of Bill Desarc came out of the shadowy corner where he sat on his unrolled bed, an unlighted cigarette between the fingers of his left hand.

"What's the odds where the lady was headin', Hawk? I'm for samplin' her cookin'. After the truck Spider's been handin' us, a reg'lar meal sounds plumb enticin'."

Kate took a deep breath, let it out slowly. The fact that Bill had not disclosed her identity and yet had spoken up so opportunely, sent a little thrill of gladness to her heart. But it also lent weight to her own conclusion regarding her danger, once Ventry found out that she was Tom Lorring's daughter.

"I'm runnin' this outfit, Desarc," stated Ventry flatly.

Bill lit a match with his thumb-nail. "Shore. But a man has a right to have opinions. Right now I'm considerably more in favor of real grub than a debate with the lady."

Kate flashed him a swift glance. He was leaning forward a little, holding the flaming match to the end of his cigarette. His left hand had moved down near the handle of one of his two guns. His gray eyes were narrowed upon Ventry's face. An impression so strange and impossible came to Kate that she dismissed it even before it was fully born, and harkened again to the drone of Ventry's voice.

"Mebbe there's another kinda debate yuh'd favor, Desarc! If it's that way——"

The atmosphere in the room suddenly was electric. Across the width of it the two men faced each other, green eyes clashing with gray. It was as if something long concealed between them had leaped suddenly to life, stark and primitive and deadly. Fingers of ice closed about Kate's heart as she watched Bill Desarc rise deliberately to his feet.

"Keep yore fur smooth, Hawk," he advised coolly. "I ain't favorin' no debate of any kind. But on the other hand, I ain't dodgin' none either, if yuh make a point of it!"

He stood erect, cigarette dangling from his firm lips, a thin line of smoke rising from it to curl beneath the wide brim of his hat. His thumbs were hooked in his crossed gunbelts, but except for the slight narrowing of his eyes he displayed no hint of tension. His assurance in the face of Ventry's obvious threat was a thing to marvel at, considering that the outlaw chief was reputed to be one of the fastest gunmen in the West. It seemed a very long time before Ventry's droning voice broke the menacing silence.

"Let it ride. But yuh'd best put a curb on yore tongue, amigo, else yuh'll find yoreself with a mess of trouble on yore hands!"

"Aim to handle any that comes my way," Desarc drawled. "But I never crowd for it."

A glint that might have meant anything appeared briefly in Ventry's eyes. He moved his head, turned and spoke to Kate. "Rustle the grub, miss. Spider'll lend yuh a hand."

Kate managed to nod, managed to turn and face the stove. A scrawny pock-marked man with a cast in his right eye came silently to show her the layout of foodstuffs.

A CERTAN measure of composure came of the familiar actions, the clatter of pots and pans, the heat of the stove.

But a kind of wonderment continued to possess her that the Bill Desarc she had known as a girl could have become the man who had, with imperturbable calm, faced down the killer-gunman. As she worked, swiftly, mechanically, she pondered the changes she'd discovered in him in that first real look at him.

No longer was he a somewhat gangling youth, but a lean and powerful man, with a look of hard competence about him. The promised ruggedness of his features had been fulfilled, even as his frame had filled out. She had seen no signs of viciousness nor depravity in his face, but she missed the boyish charm and recklessness she had known and loved. And she wondered what truly lay beneath the controlled calm and bleakness that had replaced it. Strangely, a kind of excitement stirred within her at the prospect of finding out exactly what kind of a man had grown out of the boy. But she was too sane-minded to let her thoughts travel far in that direction.

At last the biscuits were done. She pushed back her red hair, turned and called gaily, "Come and get it, gents!"

"Sit with us, Kate," Ventry invited. "Try this box."

They crowded around a long table made of planks hewn by hands long forgotten. Kate was placed at the head of the table, with Ventry at her right and Spider at her left. Bill Desarc sat farther down, and although she glanced at him now and then, he did not seem once to lift his eyes from his plate. He was the first to finish and leave the table.

"Yo're a prime cook," Ventry told her, approvingly. "Howcome yo're still runnin' free?"

Kate looked at him. "How do you know I haven't a husband and half a dozen children waiting for me at home?" she challenged.

He smiled thinly. "I'll gamble on the kids apart. Yuh ain't got the age nor the look of it. As for havin' a man—who might he be?"

"Still curious!" She shook her head mockingly. "Maybe you don't believe a woman can keep a secret!"

Shrugging, he rose to his feet. "If yore husband should come a-lookin' for yuh an' bust in here," he pointed out, "it might be less embarrassin' if we knowed him."

"There's no danger," Kate declared, incautiously.

"So," he droned softly. "I'm glad of that." And then, even as a small chill traveled down her spine, he turned to speak to Spider. "Tell Kip to come in an' eat."

The pock-marked outlaw sidled out of the room, vanished into the gloomy hall. Rain drove against a small window in which the glass remained unbroken. The wind screamed about the corners of the old building. Kate lifted a steaming kettle from the stove, poured water into a pan. Action of any kind was preferable to twiddling her thumbs and enduring the covert glances of the outlaws.

When Kip came in, he and Ventry exchanged a few, low-voiced words, after which Ventry left the room. This, and the manner of the other men, gave her to understand that the gaunt giant was second in command of the gang, and that for some reason it was now arranged so that either he or Ventry would be in that room at all times. But before she could make anything out of this, the bony Kip gave her a friendly grin and sat himself at the table, where he proceeded to eat with the single-mindedness of a hungry wolf.

KATE began to wash up the dishes, making more of a clatter than was absolutely necessary, to drown out the sound of the storm. She heard one of the outlaws invite Bill Desarc to take a hand at blackjack, heard Bill's quiet refusal. A few minutes later he passed behind her

to put wood in the stove, and could not help looking at him. His answering glance was full of grave warning. He went directly back to his blankets. Kip finished his meal, brought his dishes to the old sink-board, complimented her on her biscuits. Then he sat down on a box near the door and began to build a smoke.

The fire roared in the stove, the wind howled, thunder rolled. Kate finished the dishes, went to stand at the window, where she tried to peer out through the accumulated grime and the blur of the rain. Behind her money clinked; one of the gamblers bit off a curse. Kip chuckled softly. And after that, for a short while, it was very quiet in the room. But Kate's ears became alert to queer, eerie sounds, magnified by taut nerves, that seemed to come from all parts of the long-abandoned building.

A scuttering of small clawed feet behind her brought her about with a startled gasp, in time to see Desarc throw a chunk of adobe at a vanishing rat that looked as big as a full grown cat.

"Yo're kinda jumpy," Kip observed. "Scared of rats, Kate?"

"I don't like them, she acknowledged, with a rueful smile. "And this storm—this place—is enough to make anybody jumpy."

"It ain't bothered me none," stated the bony outlaw. "How about yuh, Desarc?"

Desarc, rolling a fresh cigarette, looked up with a slight smile. "Reckon to get by," he drawled. "But ladies is different than us hard hombres, I've heard."

Kip nodded and chuckled again. "Admittin' yo're hard an' that yuh know about women—all in the same breath. First braggin' I've heard yuh do."

Desarc licked down the lap of his cigarette paper. "I ain't braggin'," he answered easily. "Leastwise, not about my knowledge of women."

"But yo're hard, huh?"

The blackjack game came to a full stop. But Desarc refused to rise to the bait, if bait it was. He laughed shortly and reached for a match. "Hard enough not to be stampeded by rats," he drawled.

For perhaps five long seconds not one of those in the room moved or uttered a sound. Kate set her teeth in her lip, clenched her hands so tightly that the nails bit into the palms of them. The impression that had come to her that other time, when Desarc faced down Ventry, became suddenly a conviction. Appearances to the contrary, there was no friendship between Bill and these other men. They stood opposed, separated by outright hostility and distrust. Their joint presence was an enigma for which she lacked the key.

"So!"

Kip muttered the single word. Then he chuckled his characteristic chuckle, wagged his head, puffed at his cigarette. The tension eased. The blackjack dealer picked up the deck, began to flip out the cards, one by one. Kate moved away from the window, halted with her back to the stove, her hands gripped tightly behind her. She looked at Kip, saw that he was hunched forward, long arms between his knees, staring at a spiral of smoke that lifted from his cigarette. Her eyes were drawn irresistibly to the other man.

Desarc seemed to have moved farther into his corner, beyond reach of the candle-light, almost concealed by wavering shadows. The end of his cigarette glowed red. What was he doing there in Las Flores with Hawk Ventry? He wore his guns, moved about as he chose, outwardly—except in those moments of tension—a member of the outlaw crew. And yet, if he was one of Ventry's men, why should that unmistakable hostility exist? Her thoughts milled hopelessly. But suddenly a logical explanation flashed into her mind.

Driven from home by false accusations, robbed of his heritage as truly as his father had been before him by those who had stolen the now worked out Las Flores mines, it was as natural that young Bill should have taken the outlaw trail as it was that his father should have turned road agent. It was equally natural that a sense of grievance should have piled up with the years. He admitted that he was hard. He'd proved it twice, in standing up grimly to Ventry and then to Kip. His presence here with them could be only an admission of his bitterness, which made him seek a means for squaring the score with those who had made him an outcast.

Undoubtedly he'd thrown in with Ventry for that purpose. They were united in some common scheme of vengeance. Kate could not find it in her heart to blame him. She could only grieve for him. He was doing what people who should have been his friends had forced him to do. The fault was theirs, not his. So powerfully was she stirred by this conclusion that her lips opened to speak to him, forgetful of her personal danger. But she did not speak. Out of the shadows where he squatted, she caught his swift gesture of warning. And then Kip chuckled.

"Just like one of them drammys I seen at the op'ry house in Tombstone once. Yo're good, the both of yuh. Yuh purty nigh fooled me! Who is the lady, Desarc? It ain't nowise friendly of yuh to hold out on us!"

It seemed to Kate that some giant hand reached out and took her by the throat. She saw the glow of Bill Desarc's cigarette, heard as from some far distance the slow drawl of his deep voice.

"Ain't yuh jumpin' kinda far, Kip? Nobody asked me if I knowed her. Likewise, I always reckoned that a man's name —or a woman's—was a personal matter that shouldn't concern me none."

What Kip might have replied Kate never knew, for at that moment Hawk Ventry paced into the room.

"We'll debate that point later," droned the outlaw chief. "It's a right interestin' one. What makes it more so is that Spider found the lady's hoss. The critter carries the Box L brand."

"Lorring's brand!" muttered Kip softly. "I kinda had it doped thataway. The flood cut her off when the bridge went out. Shore! She——"

"That lousy star-toter's gal!"

FOR the first time Ventry's voice lifted above its normal drone. It rasped and grated like a fine biting steel. Kate straightened, stiffened, her clenched hands at her sides, arms rigid. Her blue eyes met unflinchingly the baleful glare of the outlaw's green orbs.

"What if I am Tom Lorring's daughter?" she demanded. "I'm not ashamed of it, Hawk Ventry!"

He strode forward until he stood within arm's length, glowering down into her upturned face. Cold and desperate fear had its teeth in her, but she gave no sign of it.

"Any other woman," he stated flatly, "would have walked outa here free an' unharmed. But havin' you turn up like this is better luck than I'd counted on!"

Swift as light, he reached for her. With a smothered cry, she swayed back, stumbled against the rough wall, barely avoiding his clutching hands. And then, from his dark corner, Bill Desarc spoke quietly.

"Just what do yuh aim to do, Hawk?"

Ventry swung about like a crouching cat. Kate began to edge along the wall towards the stove, her back scraping the rough adobe.

"Keep outa this, Desarc!" snarled Ventry. "Yuh allowed yuh had an old score to settle on this range. Me, I'm settlin' one of my own now—with Lorring! He killed three of my best men—he

run us ragged—he played hell with a game that was payin' big! Well, by Gawd, he'll sample some real hell hisself when he knows I've got his gal—an' what——"

"Don't do it, Hawk," Desarc advised evenly. "Let her go!"

He was out of his corner now, across the room from Kate, almost facing the door, with the three blackjack players at his right. He stood with his feet well apart, the left thrust slightly forward, arms bent a trifle at the elbows. It seemed to Kate that the clash of his eyes with Ventry's made audible sound. Then she realized that a hush like that of death had fallen upon the sound of his steady voice, and that through some strange coincidence the silence in the room was accompanied by a lull in the storm.

She halted her sideways movement, stood fast, harkening to the pounding of her heart, the harsh breathing of the men, the soft crackle of burning wood in the stove. Her hand touched the handle of the frying pan, closed about it tightly. That strange hush seemed to last a long time. Her glance traveled beyond Ventry again, clung to the grim-faced man who confronted the killer. It came to her that Bill had chosen his position so that if it came to gunplay—as seemed inevitable—she would be out of the line of fire.

In that moment she had a strange experience. She saw herself and young Bill Desarc, dreaming on a sunny hillside, felt the strength of his arms about her, shivered again with the ecstacy of their first kiss. She heard in memory the husky murmur of his voice, telling her that he loved her. And once more she visualized that night, three long years ago, when he rode away from her into the starlit darkness. She knew now that the boy who had gone away would never return. But the man who had come back—the man who stood facing Hawk Ventry and Kip and Spider and the other three—was her man. No matter what else he might be, he was her man!

"Yuh damn meddlin' fool!" The snarl of Ventry's voice shattered the spell. She saw the dip of the killer's hands beginning his smooth effortless draw, and hurled the heavy frying pan with all her strength, straight at the base of his neck!

IT STRUCK him as his guns cleared leather. It knocked him to his knees. Instantly she dove for him, landed with her full weight on his shoulders, flattened him.

Even as she flung herself at Ventry, however, gunflame streaked out of the doorway where Spider crouched. The blasting thunder of other guns filled the room. The candles jerked out. In shadowy half-light one man fought against six. Clawing desperately, Kate grabbed one of Ventry's weapons, only to have him surge up beneath her, fling her off, thrust her so savagely against the wall that her breath jerked out and the pistol dropped from her hand. She huddled there partly stunned, while a high-pitched horrible scream rose above the roar of guns.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the shooting ended.

Long seconds passed in which it seemed to Kate that she would surely die. A man groaned in the darkness across the room. There was stealthy movement, the rasp of harsh breathing.

"Kip! Spider!" That was Ventry's voice, curt, peremptory.

"Spider got his," came the answer from Kip. "That hombre was a fightin' fool!"

More cautious motion, and then Ventry spoke again impatiently. "Strike a light! Who else is on deck?"

A match flared, touched flame to candles. Pale light filtered through swirling gunsmoke. Kate sagged against the wall, gripped by horror. Spider sprawled face down in the doorway. Two other men lay apparently dead, while a third sat on the

floor with his arms wrapped tightly around his stomach. The gaunt shape of Kip moved towards the man who lay almost on his face, one knee doubled, one arm flung out beyond his tawny head. The bony outlaw's queer chuckle was ghoulish.

"Looks like there was just two of us left, Hawk. Yuh an' me—an' the lady! This coot is finished."

"Best to be shore of it," droned Ventry.

Paying no heed to Kate, he also paced across the floor. Kate closed her eyes. She could not bear to look. Nor was there any thought of escape in her mind. It did not matter any longer what became of her. Bill—Bill was dead! A sob stuck in her throat, and then, against her will, she did look where Kip, leaning above the prostrate body of the man she loved, reached down a bony hand to turn Bill Desarc to his back.

She looked, and suddenly her heart leaped and a cry burst from her lips. A cry that was drowned in the roar of a gunshot! For even as Kip's hand touched him, Bill Desarc writhed to his knees. And as he surged up he shot. Kip was almost lifted off his feet by the impact of the bullet that struck his chest. He jerked erect, swayed and plunged headlong.

Ventry leaped aside like a startled cat. Another gunshot followed. Then the two men were locked together, hand clamped to wrist, chest pressing against chest. Desarc's rush carried them clear across the room, backed Ventry into the hot stove. A howl of pain ripped above their grunting breaths and the scuffling of their feet. A violent surge almost flung Desarc off, loosened his hold. Ventry broke free, swung viciously at Desarc's head with a long gunbarrel. Bill ducked under the blow, drove his left fist into Ventry's midsection, smacked his right—gripping the butt of his gun—into Ventry's face. They whirled away from the stove, crashed into the wall, this time with Desarc acting as buffer.

Kate darted across the room, scooped up a fallen gun. As she wheeled back, the two men staggered away from the wall, leaped apart. She saw Ventry swing his gun down. The roar of the shot sounded a split second after Desarc's lashing gun barrel cracked down above the killer's ear. The bullet went into the floor. Ventry fell on his face and lay there, quivering.

"Bill! Oh, Bill! You——"

THE gun dropped from Desarc's hand. He swayed, sagged, braced himself by a visible effort of will, lifted his head. Blood trickled from a gash above his right temple. His torn and powder-burned shirt was matted with blood from body wounds. It was unbelievable that he should be still alive. But he was, and all at once the grim harsh lines of his face were shattered by a crooked, boyish smile. And then Kate's arms were about him tightly, holding and supporting him.

"Kate!" he muttered. "My Kate!"

For a moment then the shambles of that room became a place of matchless beauty. In the meeting of their lips all fear and doubt and uncertainty fled. Kate knew that her man had indeed come back to her!

It was Bill who ended the moment. He lifted his head, thrust her gently away. "There's business to be wound up, sweet," he told her, drawling. "It might be some time afore the posse gets here. I aim to see that Ventry hangs!"

A throb of amazement went over Kate, but she asked no question then. Between them they bound the unconscious Ventry hand and foot. After that they checked up on the rest of the gang. Kip and Spider were dead, another man was dying. The remaining two were wounded badly but not fatally.

"It wouldn't have been possible but for you, Kate," muttered Bill. "Slammin' that skillet at Hawk saved my life—gave me a break. An' it kinda—worked out."

"Yes," said Kate softly. "It kinda worked out, Bill! Now you sit here and let me tend you. I can't have you passing out on me—not now!"

He almost did pass out while she worked over him, but somehow he managed to hold onto consciousness. Four bullets had struck him. That he should have been able to fight through and remain on his feet was like a miracle. But Kate found it no more so than the fact of his return.

"What did you mean about a posse coming, Bill?" she asked him as she washed and dressed an ugly slash along his upper ribs.

"Meant I sent for 'em, sweet," he answered. "Yuh see, Ventry an' his outfit robbed an S. P. mail train some months back. Killed a friend of mine that was express messenger an' got away with the loot. About a week ago I caught up with them. Figgerin' to spot the cache an' get back the stuff they stole, I made out to be on the dodge myself—with a grievance against the folks on this range. Soon as I was shore Las Flores was their regular hideout, an' that the lot was cached right here in this buildin', I sent word—to Canyon. That was this mornin'. Reckon the storm has held things up, sorta."

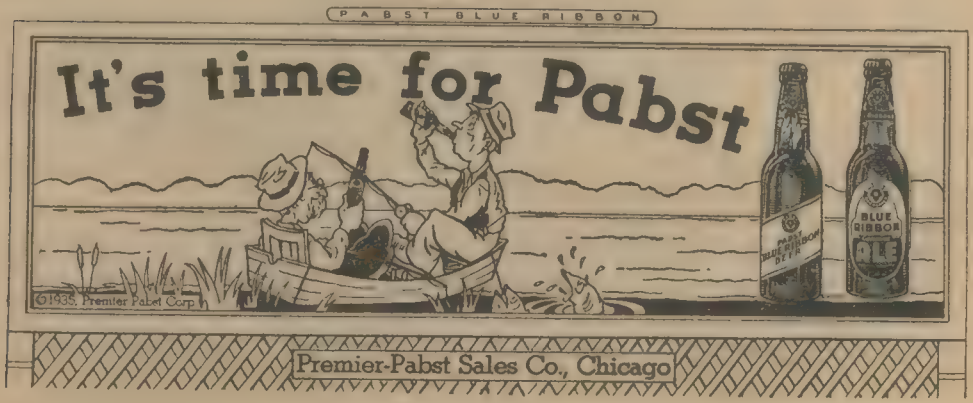
Grinning crookedly, he dug down in a pocket and brought out a gold badge. It said that he was a deputy United States marshal. Kate didn't say anything. Everything was confused, unreal. There were many questions still unanswered, but none of them seemed important. She rose from her knees, turned unsteadily. Then he was on his feet, too, and she was caught fast once more in his arms.

"We'll go to Canyon with the posse, Kate," he murmured, his lips against her red hair. "There'll be no crossin' the creek for another day, mebbe more. An' besides, there's no preacher at the Box L, is there?"

Kate moved her head against his breast. "Preacher?" Her voice was muffled, almost inaudible. "Whatever do you mean, Bill?"

"Why this!" he drawled, and gently tipped her head back against his arm and kissed her on the lips. "Didn't I say I'd come back for yuh, Kate? An' didn't yuh say yuh'd wait?"

Her arms slid up around his neck, and tightened.



CHAMPION OF

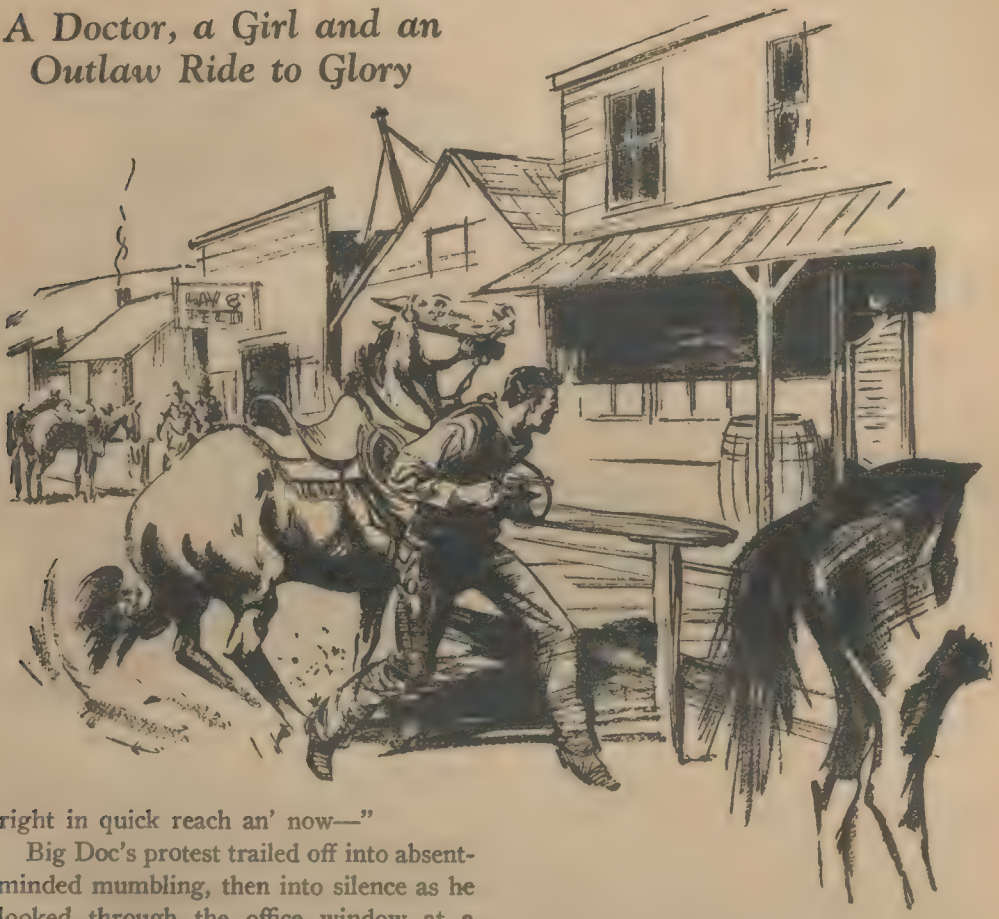
A Novelette by
Cliff Farrell
(Author of "Honkatonk Girl," etc.)

Lonnie Whipple was a doctor's daughter, Dane Merrick an outlaw, wounded, perhaps dying far off in the trackless hills. All the world seemed conspired to keep her from him; his camp was utterly lost, and the law clung close to her trail. But Lonnie loved him, and he needed her—and neither guns nor men nor nature's barriers could keep her away. . . .

BIG DOC WHIPPLE was lecturing to his daughter. "Lonnie, I ain't going to stand for it," he was saying. "By gosh it'll take me all day to find anything I want if you don't quit turnin' my office wrong end backward. If you don't quit, I'm warning you I'll go on a bender to settle my nerves. I had everything

HUNTED MEN

A Doctor, a Girl and an Outlaw Ride to Glory



right in quick reach an' now—"

Big Doc's protest trailed off into absent-minded mumbling, then into silence as he looked through the office window at a young rider who came slowly into town and alighted at the Buffalo Bar.

His daughter paused in her activities, and followed his gaze. Lenora Whipple had been home in Lupine only a day, barely long enough to again get used to being called Lonnie instead of Miss Whipple. She had just finished four years in college, three in medical school and she was back with her father and glad of it.

She had been wielding a dust rag. A broom and mop were her other weapons near at hand. She wore jeans, her old half boots, and a flannel shirt rolled to the elbows. That, she had assured Doc, was the only costume for a messy job like this.

Since morning she had been renovating the two rooms at the front of the rambling log homestead that Big Doc used as offices. Slowly dissolving before her attack was the accumulation of years, the cobwebs and the dust, the littered residue. She had gone rough-shod over Doc's objections, harried him with mop and broom. A fumigation she termed it—but it was an orgy of destruction in his opinion.

"Who is he?" Lonnie asked, coming to the window, looking at the man who had just ridden in. "Why—why he looks like Dane Merrick. But no. It must be another of—"

"Yeah," Doc said. "It's Johnny Merrick, the youngest of the brothers. All

the Merricks look something alike. Johnny only weighed three pounds the first time I saw him. Now look at him. Six-footer, an' beginnin' to widen out."

But Big Doc was eyeing the ponies racked in front of the Buffalo. Four were bays from Owen Selig's Arrow X spread south of Lupine. The doctor seemed to be waiting—waiting and listening.

"Things have been happening in the El Capitan country lately," he said quietly. "The Merrick boys, and their cousins, the Tarbells, don't operate the old Bar W any more. They've—"

A sudden crash of six-shooters cut him off—the hard, jarring slam of one shot, with two others echoing it. Then more reports came, in a chattering jumble from the interior of the Buffalo Bar. Lonnie Whipple saw a coil of gun-smoke drive over the tops of the bat wing doors. It glinted gray-blue in the sunlight. . . .

Then a stumbling figure came out—Johnny Merrick! Lonnie knew he had been hit, for he was queerly bent. He was backing out, a smoking gun in his hand. He fired again as the doors made their inward swing.

He reached his horse, missed his first uncertain try for the stirrup, found it. He dragged himself into the saddle as though unutterably weary.

But always he kept his gun pointed at the door of the Buffalo. A shot bellowed from the interior. Dust flew from the peak of his hat. His horse kettled, and his wavering fingers had difficulty finding the dragging reins.

At last he whirled and headed up the street. And she saw a stain on his worn blue shirt—a gray, sickly pallor on his thin, freckled face.

BIG Doc ran out and down the porch steps to the sidewalk. Lonnie reached the door in time to see Johnny Merrick sag slowly from the saddle as his horse hit full stride. He hung on an instant, then slipped, landed in the dust directly in front of her father's house.

Big Doc leaped into the street and picked up Johnny Merrick's huddled body. The young puncher looked frail in his grasp, for Big Doc stood six feet two, and had not dared weigh himself since the years began adding size to his belt instead of his shoulders.

Men were now rocketing from the Buffalo, guns in their hands. Lonnie recognized Owen Selig of the Arrow X. Selig had not changed much. He probably was forty now, but still lean, lithe and striking in his aquiline, dark-featured way. He still dressed well, with a modulated taste for color. And now his eyes were dark, flaring jets, his white teeth gleaming.

Big Doc came up the porch with his burden. Lonnie ran to open the door of the inner office.

"Close it, Lonnie," Big Doc said as he placed Johnny Merrick on the operating table. "Lock it."

He found his instruments at hand, and had no time to ponder that marvel. Usually he had to search a cluttered room for them. Lonnie was already clipping away Johnny's dusty vest and shirt.

Big Doc cast her a glance of approval. "They do teach some things in school don't they," he muttered. "But I reckon you didn't get many gunshot cases to practice on. Well, it looks like we'll have plenty of 'em around——"

Boots thundered in the ante room. "Open up, Whippple," Owen Selig's voice came thick with deadly fury. "We want that devil. He just gunned my brother. He killed Bo in the Buffalo just now. Open up!"

Big Doc's lips pursed, his eyes narrowed. "Johnny Merrick is hard hit, Owen," he called. "Maybe dying. What do you want with him?"

"You know what I want," Selig rasped.

"Open the door, or by the flames of hell I'll kick it down."

Big Doc worked steadily on. "Got two slugs in him," he muttered. "We'll take this one out of his shoulder. Second went under the heart. Missed though, an' lodged in his back. Can't get it now. He's too far gone. Hand me that probe, an' get some——"

A boot smashed against the door, and the old lock broke. Owen Selig was framed there, with Tut Venters and Chub Yager, hard-bitten, ice-eyed men who rode for him.

Vengeance and death were in Selig's contorted face and reflected in the eyes of his men. But they found the path blocked in a manner they least expected.

Lonnie had whirled and stood facing them, her gray eyes flashing fire. "Get out!" she said huskily. "Get out! You shan't kill a helpless boy, no matter what he's done. The law will take care of him."

Selig had taken one automatic stride forward. He paused abruptly. He stared while recognition slowly penetrated his red rage. His gaze wandered to the operating table, then back to Lonnie.

"I didn't know you were home, Lonnie," he said hoarsely, his straight body quivering with tension.

Selig continued to stare. He took in the sweep of her figure. He remembered her as slim, boyish. She seemed smaller to him now. Even her ash blonde hair was richer in color, with grace in its heavy mass. He saw reflection of her father's ruggedness in the chiseling of her face. Her little chin was firm, her mouth frank, the underlip full and alluring.

Big Doc looked up. "You had your chance in the Buffalo, Owen," he remarked caustically. "Why didn't you get him then. If you do it now, it will be cold murder. I don't stand for losing patients that way. Pull in your horns. Send Walsh Dockery around. Dockery can have him if he pulls through. Until then he stays here."

Selig stood a moment, then shrugged bitterly and turned away. The presence of Lonnie Whipple had saved young Johnny Merrick's life. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Men From the Night!

"AS I was sayin'," Big Doc muttered after they had gone. "Looks like you'll get plenty of practice with gunshot cases if you stay in this office. I wonder what Dane and Spot Merrick and the Tarbells will do now. This ought to bring 'em out of the hills if anything does. They won't let Johnny go over the road without a fight."

"What do you mean—out of the hills?"

Her father cast her a grim glance. "The Merrick and Tarbell boys went outlaw six months ago," he said. "There's a thousand dollars on the heads of any of 'em, an' double that for Dane Merrick's scalp. Owen Selig put up half of the bounty. The county is standin' for the rest."

Lonnie's color faded. She and Dane Merrick had been schoolmates here in Lupine. She knew Spot, his older brother, knew their cousins, Al and Chuck Tarbell. Wild blood was the heritage of the Merricks and Tarbells. Such had always been the saying in the El Capitan country—and now the wild blood seemed to have come to the surface.

Lonnie pointed at Johnny. "And him?" she questioned.

Big Doc was still working, his huge hands gentle, steady. "I reckon they figured Johnny was too young to have his life ruined. They left him behind. They forgot he was a Merrick too. There's been a lot of rustling and a few highway robberies. Then the other day Owen Selig

was held up for five thousand in beef money he was carrying. He identified the Merricks and Tarbells and boosted the bounty on their heads."

Big Doc stepped back, his task done. "I reckon Johnny came to Lupine today to call Owen a liar," he mused. "Johnny has always been willin' to fight anybody who said his brothers were robbers."

"How did it start?" Lonnie asked tensely.

"A year ago old Tom Wilson was murdered on the range," Doc explained. "Him bein' the uncle of the Merrick and Tarbell boys who he raised from pups, his ranch goes to them, split five ways. There was some ugly rumors, hinting that Old Tom was cut down by one or all of the boys so they would own the spread. Then Dane Merrick asks Owen Selig to reach for his hardware here in the street one day. Owen prefers fists, and takes a whale of a trimming."

Doc looked absently through a window. "After that the fun began. Selig had land titles looked into, and found enough flaws in the old Bar W survey to throw half of it open for entry. Selig grabbed it himself before the boys got wise. That danged near ruined 'em. They were forced to get rid of cattle, and took a big loss.

"There was some line fence sniping, with a couple on each side gettin' winged. Then one of Selig's punchers was killed. Dane Merrick was accused of dry-gulchin' him. Walsh Dockery, who is sheriff now, tried to arrest Dane and Al Tarbell on murder charges. They wouldn't arrest worth a cent. The upshot was that a posse run all of 'em but Johnny into the brakes below El Capitan peak. They've been there ever since, for nobody knows those rabbit runs as well as that outfit."

A STEP sounded in the ante room, and Big Doc turned. "Howdy Walsh," he said without enthusiasm.

Walsh Dockery, the youngest man ever to hold down the sheriff's office in Lupine, doffed his big, cream-colored hat to Lonnie, and extended an eager hand. Here was another childhood friend grown to manhood. Lonnie admitted that Walsh Dockery was handsome. Big, broad-shouldered, his curly brown hair rambled in an unruly mop. He had grinning brown eyes. His face was built like a strong wedge, slanting down to a square, jutting chin.

"If you ain't an eyeful, Lonnie," he said, holding her hand. "You're goin' to be stumblin' over me every minute, if the Lord is willin'."

"Hello, Walsh," Lonnie said quietly, still depressed by the story her father had told.

Dockery looked down at Johnny Merrick, who was white and still as death itself. "Just rode in an' heard about it," he said regretfully. "Selig has filed a murder charge. I got to arrest him."

"Not until I say so, young fella," Big Doc stated. "And that won't be for some time. He might live. I figure that he will. The Merricks don't die easy."

Dockery shrugged. "What if he spooks away?"

Big Doc snorted. "I'll buy you a barrel of whisky for every step that boy takes in the next two weeks," he said.

"Well," Dockery conceded. "You're the doctor. But don't let him play possum, Big Doc. He murdered Bo Selig, an' he's got to pay the piper. He steps into the Buffalo an' opens up without warnin'. I'd have a hot time explainin' to Owen Selig if he got away."

He turned to Lonnie. "Too bad about those boys goin' bad," he said. "Dane Merrick went to school with us. Remember, Lonnie? Now he's a killer with a price on his head. Say, there's a dance at the old school house Saturday night. I hope I'm askin' you first."

Lonnie smiled a little. "Perhaps," she said absently. "But Walsh! Do you really think Dane Merrick is a killer?"

"What would you call a dry-gulcher?" Dockery said grimly.

Lonnie was not smiling when he left. She smiled no more that day. She and her father were busy with Johnny Merrick the remainder of the afternoon, nursing his slender hold on life.

Early in the evening a rancher from east of town came rushing in. "Horse kicked my baby, Doc," he groaned. "The kid is layin' there white an' still an' hardly breathing."

Big Doc gathered his kit, paused long enough to feel Johnny's pulse. He nodded in satisfaction.

"Heart stronger," he commented. "He'll make it, I think. But watch him Lonnie. You know what to do if a hemorrhage starts. That's all we got to worry about."

They had moved the patient to a cot in the living room, which had too often served as a hospital ward in the past. Lonnie sat for a time, staring and thinking. She could not get her mind away from thoughts of Dane Merrick—the one figure from her home range who had always been vivid in her memory during her years away.

AFTER a time she realized she was utterly weary. She changed to her nightgown, donned a robe and slippers and whiled time by inspecting her father's carelessly-kept ledger. Most of the accounts were unpaid.

She regularly inspected the patient. Johnny Merrick was over the hill—his breathing deeper, steadier. He slept now, instead of lying in a coma.

The town was still alive, but the knot of curious that had grouped in front of the house, was now gone. She reflected that nobody came to offer help, to ask about Johnny Merrick. Perhaps they did not dare. Already she sensed that Owen Selig bulked up as a power to reckon with in this range. Men evidently did not care to show open interest in Selig's enemies.

She aroused, realizing she had been sleeping. She woke with a start—for a man was in the room! He was tall, grim. Yellow dust lined the seams of his boots. His clothes, and an indefinite wariness told her that here was a man who lived close to the earth—a hunted man.

Dane Merrick! Her recognition was instantaneous in spite of the vast change in him.

"Hello, Lonnie," he said softly. "The back door was unlocked, so I came in. I expected Big Doc. Sorry I frightened you. I came to get Johnny."

He glanced at the cot. His eyes seemed a flat, slatey hue now. They had been gray-blue in her memory. His gauntness clutched at her heart.

"Dane!" she finally managed to say. Her eyes wandered fearfully to the windows. But the shades were drawn.

He guessed her apprehension. "Spot and the Tarbells are out there," he said. "Nobody will surprise me."

"How did you know about Johnny?" she asked in wonder.

He smiled a little, without humor. "We've still got a few friends," he remarked. "We heard about it."

He moved to the cot, leaned over it and stared long at his brother. Then he turned with a glance of moody inquiry.

Lonnie shook her head. "You can't move him. He would die. He's barely alive now."

"If we leave him here they'll hang him," he said harshly. "I won't let that happen. It was a fair fight. Bo Selig drew first. Johnny beat him to the trigger. But they'll lie him to the gallows,

just like they've lied about everything else."

She stiffened. "You shan't take him. Big Doc saved him today—saved his life! I won't let you destroy it now. You know in your heart you can't do it. You've changed Dane—changed terribly. You're hard, desperate. You're a—an outlaw. But he's your brother. You can't be the cause of his death."

He eyed her bleakly. "You were going to call me a killer," he said. "That's the brand I wear. Well, I have killed a man. But not from cover. That puncher notched on me first from a coulee. He missed. I didn't."

"There were eye-witnesses," she accused him.

His bitter smile chilled her. "Men don't see straight in this country any more," he rasped. "Nor talk straight. Some day you'll learn that yourself. I'm a rustler, yes. We're stealing cattle from Owen Selig to even up for what we lost when they drove us to the hills. They mavericked our Bar W brand. We're only taking what is ours by rights. But bein' rustlers we're everything else—holdup men, killers, wolves with bounty on our heads."

She glanced from him as Spot Merrick, the oldest of the three brothers, appeared in the door leading to the kitchen. Spot ran chunkier of body than Dane and Johnny. His rugged face was hard, freckled, like weathered granite. "We can't stay here all night, Dane," he growled. "Somebody is sure to stumble on us."

Dane shook his head. "The kid is shot up plenty," he said grudgingly. "We can't take him. Come on, let's ride."

Spot looked skeptically at Lonnie. "She'll have 'em at our heels before we can—" he began.

"I say to ride," Dane's voice came sharp and peremptory. And he pushed Spot into the darkness of the kitchen.

She heard the door close—then silence. These men had learned to walk without sound in the night. She stood there a long time, visualizing them hugging shadows as they cleared town. She fancied after awhile that the balmy night wind carried the murmur of galloping hoofs from the flats beyond town. But that perhaps was only imagination.

After that she was tautly awake. Her father returned just before dawn. Big Doc was weary. He took two stiff slugs from the jug on his desk, then looked at Johnny Merrick.

"He's doin' all right, too," he said. "I had a tough job on that Jenkins kid tonight, but he'll make it all right." Then he eyed Lonnie sharply. "You look plenty peaked. Anything wrong?"

"No," she said. "No. There's nothing wrong."

CHAPTER THREE

Five Against Five Hundred!

JOHNNY MERRICK was able to talk by noon the next day, but he remained tight-lipped in regard to the shooting in the Buffalo. Walsh Dockery came to question him, but Big Doc wouldn't allow it. Dockery placed a gun guard of two special deputies over the house.

"Some of Selig's Arrow X riders," Big Doc grumbled sourly, eyeing the first shift of guards who sat in the shade of an adjoining house. "A hard crew—gunmen, all of 'em."

Bo Selig was buried that morning. Owen Selig called on Lonnie in the evening. He was no longer the snarling vengeance-seeker of the previous day. He had doffed his range garb for a conservative dark suit, white shirt and black string tie. He had a gun under his coat—but made a distinguished figure, just the same.

"I'm apologizing for yesterday, Lonnie," he said humbly. "I was a little loco because of Bo's death. You were right. It's up to the law now."

As they chatted, she realized the fascination and power of this man. And, at the same time, she became aware of her own power over him. Deep in his eyes she could already read his purpose. Owen Selig meant to win her for his own. And she sensed that he was accustomed to getting what he wanted.

"I'd like to arrange a barbecue in your honor at the ranch," he said when he arose to go. "Would Saturday be all right?"

Lonnie felt an inward shock, remembering that Owen Selig had seen his brother buried only that morning.

"Sorry," she said. "Walsh Dockery asked me to the school-house dance here in Lupine Saturday."

"Oh, Dockery," Selig smiled. "Walsh will likely be busy Saturday. Sheriffs have uncertain hours, you know."

Then he strolled out, his boot heels clicking the boards of the sidewalk with steady, assured stride.

The next day Walsh Dockery came around. "Got to back out of asking you to the hop, Lonnie," he said sourly. "I'm out to serve grand jury summonses, an' can't be back in time. Durn the luck."

Owen Selig must have had prophetic foresight, Lonnie thought. But when Selig appeared shortly to renew his barbecue invitation she declined.

"Some other time, I hope," she said. "I'm needed here. Doc is busy, and we've got Johnny Merrick to look after. He isn't out of danger by any means."

"Next week, then," Selig persisted, and she agreed.

JOHNNY MERRICK improved steadily. In a week he was sitting up. But he was still taciturn. He spent his time staring from a window toward El Capitan, whose bald, soaring summit notched the blue sky twenty miles to the southwest.

Lonnie felt a maternal, protective dread for this lanky boy who sat in the shadow of Owen Selig's vengeance. She knew that Johnny had been earning a meager living by breaking broncs, pitching hay, doing any odd jobs he could rake up at the ranches around. Now bleak stone walls, or perhaps the noose, was to be his end.

She knew what he was thinking as he stared into the blue haze that held the big peak. One day she sat down beside him. "They came the first night you were here, Johnny," she said softly. "They came to take you away. But I wouldn't let them."

His head jerked up, and life glowed in his sunken eyes. "Dane?" he exclaimed eagerly.

She nodded. "You were too weak to be moved. But they know. They know about you."

That was tonic to this boy who had known the haunting fear that his brothers had abandoned him. He looked at Lonnie with new respect. He had been sullenly suspicious of everyone before, even of Big Doc. Now he warmed up to her.

"Listen Lon—er Miss Whipple," he stuttered, and in that moment he was a tortured boy in need of a sympathetic ear. "I didn't murder Bo Selig. I went there to make Owen Selig eat that lie he told about my brothers robbing him on the trail. Bo started to sneak his draw. I got him first. That's the truth."

"I believe you, Johnny," she said. . . .

Sinister things were happening while Johnny lay there in bed. A mail stage, connecting with a mountain town to the west, was held up, the driver wounded, and the sacks looted. Ten thousand in currency was in the mail that day. Four

riders did the job. Driver and passengers could not describe them accurately, for they had worn grotesque disguises made from blankets that effectively shielded them. But there was no doubt in Lupine. The Merricks and the Tarbells were road agenting again. . . .

The body of a high-play gambler, heading out of Lupine with a stake to open a bank in greener fields, was found on the south trail. Again the Merricks and Tarbells were blamed.

Johnny Merrick heard of this from the gun guards that watched the house. They taunted him with the stories.

"Give a dog a bad name," he said bitterly to Lonnie. "Dan an' Spot an' the Tarbells wouldn't rob an' kill. Some wild bunch has come in to take the profits an' let them carry the blame."

Lonnie knew in her heart, somehow, that the boy was telling the truth. She would have told him that she knew—but a shadow fell over his bed: the guards were never far away. . . .

WHEN the day for the barbecue came Lonnie rode out to Owen Selig's ranch. The leading ranchers and their families were there and most of the shining lights of Lupine. Only Big Doc stayed home, and played checkers with Johnny.

Walsh Dockery was present. He looked at Lonnie with hidden longing. But he devoted himself to other girls while Owen Selig monopolized the one the sheriff most wanted. He sided her home that evening. He did not speak of love, but she knew that it would not be long before he proposed.

She lay awake for hours that night thinking of Selig. He was something of a puzzle to her—a fascinating enigma. His Arrow X was sizable, but there were bigger ranches in this range though none of them seemed to have the same prosperity. Selig carried an excess crew. Some, like Tut Venters and Chub Yager, were fighting men who drew high pay, Lonnie knew from common gossip. It was their job to stamp out the rustling. Thus far they had failed.

Still, Owen Selig did not seem to have lost any by all this rustling. He had money, more than other ranchers. And by dominant personality or otherwise, Selig was looked up to by most men.

He called often to see Lonnie. He learned of her birthday, and brought a blooded saddle horse as a present. She refused it on the grounds that it was too big a present. Thereafter he reserved it for her own use, and often she rode it in his company of late afternoons.

A month passed, and Johnny Merrick was moved to jail. In another week he went on trial, charged with murder. As far as the brothers were concerned, Johnny seemed forgotten by them. Lonnie was sure he had heard nothing from them.

The trial lasted from morning until dusk. Owen Selig, Tut Venters and Chub Yager told their stories. They testified that Johnny had entered the saloon and fired without warning. A bartender and a liquor-sodden town bum corroborated them. His only defense was his own word.

The verdict was guilty, but with a recommendation of mercy because of Johnny's youth. A life sentence!

Lonnie had not gone to the trial. When news of the verdict came she felt relief that it had not been a death penalty, and at the same time a weary numbness at the thought of that boy emptying out his life behind bars.

Looking from a window she watched the crowd surge from the courthouse, and flood into the barrooms. She saw Johnny brought out, wedged among a knot of deputies and Arrow X gun riders. They hurried him to the jail, which was in a

separate building adjoining the courthouse.

She saw Big Doc ploughing homeward, and she knew that he had been hitting the bottle. This was one time she didn't blame him. Big Doc had liked Johnny Merrick too.

"I'd get drunk as a lord if I was a man," she assured herself bitterly. But she was a woman, so she went into the kitchen to start supper. She had to do something to occupy her mind. Then she paused, tensing. A strange, throbbing hush had clapped down on the town.

Then bedlam! She heard a shrill yell of alarm. The staccato bellow of six-shooters—the thud of hoofs. More guns joined in a hammering uproar that slapped against the building fronts in heavy echo.

RACING hoofs came as a pattering undertone. Through the window she saw riders coming up the street. They crouched low, hipping around, with guns smoking in their hands.

Bullets were droning in the street. She saw one of the horses stagger to its knees. Its rider cleared the saddle, landed running, and scarcely without pause in stride, was on a cow pony that had been left at a rail across the street.

Dane Merrick! And she saw Johnny Merrick among the other four who slowed their mounts for a stride. Then all swept on, with Dane only a leap behind them.

Big Doc was standing on the porch, slapping his hat and whooping. "Ride! Damn you! Ride!" he bellowed.

Indistinctly she realized that somehow the Merricks and Tarbells had done the impossible. They had snatched Johnny from the midst of this hostile town.

Lonnie babbled something as they swept by—perhaps a prayer. The thin scream of bullets was in the air, and she ran out and tried to drag Big Doc inside the door. But he was bulky and stubborn.

"They're makin' it," he chortled. "Never seen anything like it. Five hundred to five, and they got away with it."

Lonnie did not believe that anyone could live through the sleet of metal that whistled up the street. Every armed man in Lupine must be shooting at those five riders.

But none of the five fell. Darkness at the bridgehead across the little wash up the street swallowed them. The firing chopped off. Cursing men were running to find their horses. She saw Owen Selig, his teeth bared again, a raving madman. And Walsh Dockery, who seemed futile and impotent, was running in circles, only one of the posse that hastily formed, instead of being the leader. Owen Selig was giving the orders.

The pursuit swept out of town. But posses had hunted and pursued the Merricks and Tarbells before without avail.

Big Doc came in, glanced guiltily at Lonnie, and summoned a scowl. "Damned outlaws," he growled. "They were hiding in the jail. Sneaked in there before the trial ended. They took Johnny from the deputies when they came inside. They locked the deputies in cells and were in the saddle before the town woke up."

Lonnie eyed him quizzically as he went to the desk and poured a drink from his jug. "You old fraud," she denounced him. "A minute ago you were drowning your sorrow. Now you're celebrating Johnny's escape. You can't hoodwink me."

Big Doc grinned shamelessly. "Nobody has proved to my satisfaction that those boys are doing all these things they lay against 'em," he confessed.

THE town boiled with rumors and false alarms. Riders milled in and out. Lonnie put the clamps on Big Doc's

jug, but he had a spare bottle cached in the kitchen that she did not know about. His mood became more mellow. Finally she ordered him to bed. He took the bottle with him.

Lonnie presently went to bed too, and strangely she felt at peace with the world. She dropped to sleep without effort, though of late she had been tossing for hours, thinking of Johnny Merrick—and of Dane. . . .

She did not know how long she had slept, when a sound awakened her. It was a soft tap on the office door—repeated.

"Who is it?" she called.

The answer was vague. "I want Big Doc. A man has been hurt."

She threw on a robe and went to Big Doc's room. He was snoring thunderously. The empty bottle was on the floor by the bed. The girl smiled, went into the office and threw the bolt. A man pushed the door open, stepped in and closed it with a single move. He was quick, wary. She gave a little, startled gasp.

The visitor was Spot Merrick. "Where's Big Doc?" he asked jerkily.

"What do you want, Spot?" she demanded.

Spot's bleak face softened a little. "You and Big Doc did a lot for Johnny," he said. "We hate to ask any more. But some of us need a doctor now. All those slugs didn't miss when we rode out of town. I want your father. He's got to go with me."

"He can't go, Spot," she said flatly. "He celebrated Johnny's escape. He's back there—dead to the world."

Spot looked haggard and despairing.

"Who—who is wounded?" she asked reluctantly.

"All of 'em," Spot said grimly.

"Dane?" she demanded with sudden sharpness. "Is he—?"

She left it unfinished. Spot did not savvy this girl.

"Dane stopped a couple," he admitted. "I don't know how hard he was hit. After we went five miles I turned back to get Big Doc. But Al Tarbell is the worst. We had to tie him to his horse. Johnny and Chuck Tarbell were hit too. But not serious."

Lonnie spoke breathlessly. "I'll go. I'll go—if you force me to. I'm a doctor too, you know."

Spot was startled. He thought for a moment. Then he nodded. "Dane will never forgive me," he groaned. "But, by glory they need help."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hunted Men!

LONNIE dressed in frenzied haste. She donned her jeans, boots, wool shirt and a leather windbreaker. She gathered instruments and equipment, then penned a note to her father. She said she was going on a sick call. That was all.

They slipped through the rear door. Now Lonnie hugged the shadows, following one of the outlawed Merricks out of Lupine. Spot led the way to two horses hidden in a clump of mesquite beyond town. They were powerful bays.

"Owen Selig's horses," Spot said. "We borrowed 'em from pasture and left 'em as a relay five miles out. Selig is a good judge of horseflesh."

They rode madly through the darkness, avoiding trails. Now and then Spot paused to listen. She knew the range was alive with riders. They raced the dawn, seeking escape from the open benches before daylight would reveal them.

They made the brushy brakes below El Capitan as gray daybreak came. Some

of Spot's worries vanished, and he eased the pace to save the horses.

This was a land of chaos, a world half-finished where maverick cattle, cougars and hunted things found refuge. Spot delved into it, leading the way on dim game trails through jungly ravines and over goat's path ascents that dizzied her.

She knew now why the Merricks and Tarbells had withstood capture. An army would be helpless against men who knew this *malpais*.

The ride ended with surprising abruptness before the sun was three hours high. She had supposed that the hideout would be far deeper in the canyons, perhaps on the far flank of El Capitan which soared above all this shattered land like a guardian spirit.

But suddenly they emerged into a little glade in the heart of a brush-choked ravine, and there, hidden under the overhang was the camp of these wanted men.

She saw Dane Merrick. He sat against a rock, cigarette dead in his lips, his face pale. He was stripped to the waist, and a crude bandage had been slung around his body. His left arm was bandaged too. Johnny and Chuck Tarbell squatted beside a figure on a blanket nearby.

Dane started up at sight of her with a muffled curse, but swayed when he gained his feet. He glared at Spot.

"You fool," he rasped. "Bringing a girl here. You fool!"

Lonnie was cool and business-like. "As long as I'm here, I may as well get to work. I'll look you over first, Dane."

"No," he said. "Help Al. I hope you can do something for him. But I'm afraid it's too late."

Al Tarbell was forty, and had been the wildest of the brood. He was at the end of the trail now. His wiry, long body seemed limp and relaxed as though after a long, hard ride. He was scarcely breathing. Lonnie bent over him, removed the bandage the others had made, and opened her instrument kit.

Al aroused a little, and smiled. "No use, Lonnie," he gasped faintly. "I got mine. I'm not kickin'. Was worth it. Didn't we slap the hooks into that town though? It was sure worth all of——"

Al Tarbell's voice faded. His lips moved on for a moment. Then Lonnie's professional veneer cracked, and she began to sob. That was the only sound in this wild glade where the spicy tang of sun-warmed cedar swept down from the heights to mingle with the earthy smell of rocks and damp earth and violets.

Then she went to Dane, who was stony of face, his eyes staring off into the distance.

"I'm not hurt," he said harshly. "A couple of scratches. Johnny and Chuck were hit. Look after them."

"Let's see your scratches," she said determinedly. And he gave in.

"Quite a scratch, this one," she observed coolly after a moment. "It was headed for your heart, but a rib turned it. Broken rib, and a nasty gouge. But you were lucky. That other one in your arm isn't so good either. I'll take the bullet out now. Then you will turn in and sleep awhile. You look like you need a rest."

SHE worked on him swiftly, efficiently. She did the wincing as she used the probe. Dane remained stolid. She made light of his injuries though the one in his side worried her.

She finished with Dane, then doctored Johnny and Chuck. In men of lesser fiber their wounds might have been serious. But their range-toughened physiques would throw off the effects within a few days. Perhaps in an hour or two they'd be around again.

But Dane needed watching until the danger of infection had passed. She closed her bag and looked around.

"Well," she said primly to Spot. "I'm hungry."

Spot began hustling a meal. "We'll hit the backtrail before sundown," he promised. "That will bring you into Lupine after dark."

"I'm too tired to go back today," she stated calmly. "Now that you've brought me here you'll have to put up with me for another day at least."

Spot eyed her doubtfully. "I don't savvy you, Lonnie. You goin' to put them on our trail when you get back to Lupine?"

Dane reared up from his blankets. "Shut up, Spot. Of course she will. What else can she do?"

"What do you think, Spot?" Lonnie asked.

"You had one chance to send them after us," he pointed out. "I mean the night Johnny was shot. You didn't do it then."

"Perhaps I didn't think it was worth while," she remarked noncommittally. "Chasing you men seems useless anyway."

"Some day they'll get us," Spot began moodily. "An' I figure it might as well be you that ought to have the rew——"

"Spot," Dane's voice came grim and biting. "I'm telling you to drop it. You hear me?"

Spot let it go at that. Dane said little more throughout the day. But Lonnie was conscious that his eyes always followed her. He was the leader. The others looked to him for final word. That she learned.

Spot built a brush shelter for her, made a bed of the best blankets the camp afforded. She helped cook a meal of butchered beef after dark. And when the campfire was down to glowing, crimson coals she came to Dane to take his pulse and temperature.

He held to her hand with sudden power. "Why did you come here, Lonnie?" he asked tensely. "You didn't have to."

She did not attempt to evade the issue. "I'm not sure myself," she said, her voice low and throaty.

He freed her hand reluctantly, as though it required an effort of will. "Outlaws aren't worth saving as a rule," he told her.

"Dane, why do you stay in this range?" she asked earnestly. "Surely revenge can't be worth the price you'll have to pay some day. You admit you're rustling cattle. Every crime that happens is laid at your door. And awful things are happening."

He sat up, a fierce, eager glow in his eyes. "You don't believe it then?" he demanded exultantly. "You don't think we are doing this robbing and murdering?"

She considered that a long time. "No," she finally admitted. "I can't believe it of you."

His low laugh was exuberant, suddenly light-hearted, and the bleakness was swept from his bronzed face. Then he sobered, and hardened again.

"This is our home range," he said. "We'll never let them drive us away. If we pull out the guilt will always be around our necks."

LONNIE slept fitfully that night. She heard the strange, coughing cry of hunting cougars; the howl of a wildcat; the patter of harried deer; the long howl of the lobo and the pre-dawn chorus of coyotes. Hunters and hunted—life and death—that was the voice of this wild region.

Her patients were well on the mend the next day. Dane's wounds were past the danger point. He was up and moving around some by noon. She knew he would recuperate swiftly.

Toward sundown Spot wrangled in the horses, and saddled a slim, smart-faced roan, with a coat like silk. Lonnie's work was done here, and she prepared to mount.

Dane came to her side and held her stirrup.

"We owe you plenty," he said. "More than any of us can ever pay back. But we hope to get a chance to try."

She was listless, depressed as she followed Spot into the vague game trail away from the clearing, wondering if she would ever see Dane Merrick again.

She aroused herself, and began taking note of the trail through the labyrinth, stamping it in her memory. She used El Capitan to her right as a guide. A mile from the hideout she passed a gaunt, fire-killed cedar, a giant, which still reared its barkless stubs of limbs high above its surroundings.

Well up on the flank of El Capitan, perhaps five miles in an airline, she saw a finger butte. She believed she could flank the mountainside to that butte, and from there locate this fire-killed cedar. The last mile to the hideout would not be hard.

Spot took her for miles through the canyons and brakes, and she became confused. That was his purpose, she knew. But she was ready to gamble that she could find the hideout by coming from the mountainside above.

It was dark when they finally reached the open benches. Lupine was only ten miles away, and Spot halted.

"You can make it all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "What about this beautiful horse? This one doesn't belong to Owen Selig. It wears no brand."

"It's yours," Spot said. "It belonged to Dane. It ran with the wild bunch beyond Timber Basin until he caught it six months ago and tamed it. A real horse."

She rode into Lupine, keeping to the darker side streets. She put the roan in her father's stable. This was one gift that she would not refuse.

The house was dark, and she needed her key to enter. Big Doc's medical kit was gone. She changed to a house frock, sat down wearily to wait. Then someone knocked on the door. It was Owen Selig.

"Been trying to locate you all day," he smiled at her.

"I was making a professional call," she said.

"You'd have had plenty of practical experience if you had been here last night," he declared. Then he stared. "Haven't you heard? Didn't you know about the hold-up?"

She shook her head.

"Why, the Merricks and Tarbells pulled their biggest job last night," he explained. "They stuck up the Denver Express thirty miles east of town. Blew the Fargo safe and got a hundred thousand in gold."

"LAST night," Lonnie repeated mechanically, fighting back the sudden, fiery pound of her heart.

"Yes," Selig nodded, lighting a cigar. "They blocked the track, and flagged the train down. They cut the express car, and ran it ahead to work on it. A guard and a messenger tried to fight it out. But they got theirs when the devils blew up the car. The guard was killed, the messenger mangled pretty bad. The engineer and fireman were slugged too. Big Doc went out to the wreck, and moved the injured on to Boulder City in a relief train. He'll likely be back tonight, however."

"The Merricks and Tarbells again," she said slowly.

"No doubt about it this time, Lonnie," Selig declared complacently. "Tut Venters was on the train. I was sending him to Denver to handle a deal for me. He saw the two that cut the train. Tut's gun was in his suitcase, so he couldn't do a thing. They were wrapped up in their usual disguises. But Tut knows Dane Merrick and Al Tarbell too well to be fooled."

Lonnie turned to putter about the room, for that gave her a chance to master her emotions. She was shaken by a sudden, stupendous revelation.

When she faced Selig again she was composed, animated. Color coursed in her cheeks, giving her radiance and beauty that aroused Selig.

He came closer. "Listen, Lonnie," he said huskily. "Listen to me. I love you. I'm mad about you. I want you. If you'll marry me I'll hog-tie the world and hand it you in a sack."

She evaded his eager arms with a little laugh. "Perhaps I don't want the world in a sack," she said lightly.

"You're young," he pressed on. "Beautiful! Too beautiful to wither in a cow-town. Hear this. We'll travel. Go everywhere. I'll sell the ranch. I'll have enough so we can laugh at the wolf as long as we live."

"You don't know how extravagant I can be," Lonnie baited him. "Ranches don't bring much these days."

Selig laughed, feeling that he was making headway. "The Arrow X will," he assured her. "I've made money there. Plenty of it. I have a stake already banked. That's the truth."

"We'll talk of it some other time," Lonnie remarked. "This is rather sudden you know. . . ."

SELIG had to be satisfied with that. After he had gone she closed the door and began to tremble. She felt defiled. It was a long time before she could think clearly again. She was taut, vibrant with the dizzy realization that she held the power to rock the El Capitan range to its foundations.

Finally she went to a window, and watched until she saw a man she knew. It was Billy Wells, a goat-whiskered old character in Lupine. She went to the porch and hailed him.

"Billy, will you tell the sheriff I'd like to see him right away," she said.

"Walsh Dockery is out huntin' the Merricks an' Tarbells," Billy snorted. "But I reckon he'll be back sometime tonight."

"Leave word then," she said. "It's important. Or better still, wait and tell him yourself. Don't tell anyone else. Will you do that for me?"

Uncle Billy was a life-long friend of Big Doc's. He promised the girl to do as she asked. But it was midnight before Walsh Dockery, saddle-worn, but still jaunty, came to the office.

She led him to the inner office. "Walsh," she said, and her expression subdued the eager, expectant light that had leaped into his eyes the moment they were alone there. "You and Dane Merrick grew up together, played together as boys, went to school together. Didn't you?"

He sobered, his face suddenly becoming blank. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Why?"

"The Merricks and Tarbells did not rob that train last night," she said bluntly.

He stared. "I have proof, positive proof," she hurried on. "I was in their hide-out with them last night. They were shot up when they made their getaway with Johnny. Spot came to get Big Doc, but I went instead. Al Tarbell is dead. He died a day before the train was held up. The others, except Spot, were wounded too."

Walsh Dockery's stare nettled her. "Don't you understand me," she cried, grasping his vest and shaking him. "I doctored them. I was with them—miles away—when that train was robbed. If they're innocent of that they must be innocent of other things, innocent of all these things that are charged against them. Do you hear?"

Dockery's jauntiness was gone. She could not fathom his expression. "You tellin' me the truth?" he finally growled.

She flared at him. "The truth? Yes! And it's time you opened your eyes, Walsh. You waste your time hunting them, blaming them for everything, while the real outlaws laugh at you. You've been a fool. You strut your star and persecute innocent men. You're blind to everything that goes on around you."

"Maybe you think you know the real robbers," Dockery challenged her.

"You don't believe me, do you?" she said grimly. "I'll prove it. I'll take you to the Merricks. To their hide-out. You can talk to them, see for yourself. You're the law here, Walsh. I want you to begin to look around and realize what is really going on in this range."

He arose. "You mean that?" he asked.

She nodded. "We can start at once."

Dockery paced the floor a moment. An uneasiness that she could not explain, aroused in Lonnie. Yet she believed she was doing the right thing. Dockery was young, vain, lazy. Still he was the sheriff, and he had been Dane Merrick's friend in the past.

"You'll play fair with the Merricks, won't you Walsh?" she asked tensely.

"Why sure, Lonnie," he said. "But this story of yours. Well—listen! I'll go. But I have some things to look after at the office. It'll take me an hour. I'll be back then."

"I'll be waiting," Lonnie promised. "Come alone. And if anybody tries to trail us, I'll turn back. Do you understand that, Walsh. You're the only one to go."

He nodded. After he had hurried out Lonnie sat thinking. She was pale and nerve-strung.

Then she went to the desk and wrote a full account of her past two days, and told where she was going with Dockery and why. She put in on the liquor jug in the desk where Doc would find it upon his return.

CHAPTER FIVE

Treachery!

EL CAPITAN'S high, round top was catching the ruddy tint of dawn, but the canyons below were still a blue-green, shapeless sea as Lonnie and Walsh Dockery pushed along the mountainside to the butte that was her first landmark.

Lonnie searched the distance with field glasses. Finally she located the dead cedar. She nodded to Dockery, and they worked down the mountain. Lonnie led the way. She was forced to find her own trail as they delved into the brakes. It proved tortuous, with much back-tracking before she won through to her land mark.

They pushed on, following a game trail up a ravine. Then a surge over a sharp ridge, and a sliding descent into a second brushy canyon.

Lonnie's heart pounded suffocatingly as they neared the glade. Would they still be there? Or like the hunted things they were, would they have moved on to some new and distant hiding place?

She cast a glance back at Dockery who had dropped fifty yards behind. He was eyeing her strangely, and is seemed that a flicker of dismay crossed his grim face. She saw something else—farther back. At the last turn they had made in this dim, jungly trail were white specks on the ground! Bits of white paper!

All this she took in during that brief glance over her shoulder. She turned back in the saddle as before. There was no outward evidence of the sudden, icy chill that rushed over her.

She was remembering things she should not have forgotten. She was recalling how Walsh Dockery had stepped aside for Owen Selig in that matter of the schoolhouse dance, and that he had given way to Selig afterwards instead of courting her as she knew he longed to do. No real man would have done that, and sud-

denly the sheriff's subservience to Selig reared up in its true sinister proportions to appall her and convince her she had made a ghastly mistake.

The glade appeared. A sob of relief welled from her. The camp under the overhang was deserted!

Dockery came up to her side as she rode nearer the camp. There she paused her horse, and whirled on him, eyes ablaze.

"You sneak! You snake!" she flared. "You marked the trail. You marked it for Owen Selig, didn't you? He's coming, following us! Following those bits of paper you scattered. Coming to trap them and kill them. Thank God they're not here. I see it all now. You—you traitor. You're Owen Selig's man. He owns you body and soul!"

Staring at him she saw the sudden, savage flare in his eyes. As though his mind had been laid bare for her to read, final revelation rushed upon her as little, mystifying details of the past few weeks suddenly dove-tailed together.

"Why—why," she almost screamed. "You're one of them. One of Selig's outfit of outlaws. You've shielded them, helped them rob and kill. You've used your badge to pin the blame on the Merricks and Tarbells. I have been blind. I should have known."

Dockery was snarling. "You fool!"

HE reached for her, leaning from the saddle. She hooked the roan, and it leaped away. From her blouse she whipped a thirty-eight.

But he had rammed steel to his horse also, and was upon her. Cursing, he knocked the gun aside before she could pull the trigger.

Then a voice broke from the brush. "Hold it Dockery!"

Dane Merrick was there. He stood not fifty feet away, hands on hips, boots spread. In his attitude there was no evidence of the wounds he carried.

Dockery straightened, the knowledge that death for him was in the air, draining his features of all color.

"Listen Dane," he said hoarsely. "Lonnie brought me here to talk to you, and——"

"I heard," Dane said icily. "And you double-crossed her. You've double-crossed every honest man in the El Capitan country. She read your brand, Walsh. You're a snake. If you want to talk, do it now. This is your last chance."

Dockery read his fate in that flinty face. He chose to fight. He streaked for his gun. But Dane Merrick drew faster. Dockery was staggered by the bullet that smashed into him before he could trip the trigger. His shot went wild. Then a second slug in his chest sent him plunging from the horse—into eternity.

Dane turned and looked at Lonnie. "How close are they?" he asked evenly. "How many?"

"I—I don't know," she panted. "I didn't know he was marking the trail until too late. Oh Dane! Dane! You've got to ride. They may be here any minute—any instant."

"Why did you bring him here?" he demanded.

"To prove your innocence," she cried. "I could think of no other way. I believed Dockery would help you when he knew the truth. At the last instant I realized what he really was."

Spot Merrick's voice lifted in sharp warning from somewhere near. "Down Dane! They're here! In the brush. Down I——"

Guns whipped roaring lances of flame from the thickets. Dane seized Lonnie and dragged her to the shelter of a boulder. There she found herself leaning against him.

Bullets were passing with a dull whine.

She heard the wail of ricochets. Dane was on his knees, forty-five in hand, peering over the boulder, seeming oblivious of the slugs that sought for him.

He was firing. She could hear other guns going near at hand. His brothers and Chuck Tarbell were there. Now she realized that they had not abandoned the hide-out after all. They had merely taken to cover when they heard her and Dockery riding up.

She knew that the guns in the brush were manned by Owen Selig and his hard-eyed crew. They must have been close on her trail through the *malpais*. Warned by the shots when Dockery chose to fight it out, they had dismounted and come up on foot.

She tried to pull Dane down, but her strength was futile. "Don't," she pleaded frantically. "Don't, Dane! You'll be killed!"

At that he crouched back, and turned to look into her eyes. He saw there the real answer to Lonnie Whipple's faith in him. He drew her to him, kissing her hungrily.

"Sweetheart!" he said. "I love you!"

"Oh, Dane," she breathed. "I love you so. But I was weak. I don't want you to die. You've suffered so much. But you've got to fight them. You've got to win."

DANE was a different man as he re-entered the bullet duel. Life was suddenly precious to him.

But they were in poor position. The firing from the brush dwindled. She could hear voices, hoarse faint words. One voice, Owen Selig's, was unmistakable. Tut Venters and Chub Yager were there, too, and half a dozen more of the Arrow X fighting men. Cruel, deadly men these, who were fighting now for more than revenge. They were fighting to save themselves.

Dane motioned her, and they wriggled to a bigger boulder. Johnny Merrick was hunkered there, a hot gun in his freckled hand. Johnny looked boyish, and a thin, happy grin hovered on his lips. Johnny was fighting at the side of his brothers, and that was all he asked of life.

Spot Merrick and Chuck Tarbell joined them behind the big rock. Here they prepared for their last stand.

"We're up against it," Dane muttered bleakly. "I figure Selig is sendin' men to the rim of the ravine to cross-fire us. Let's roll up some rocks to back us up."

They bellied out to drag in all the movable rocks within reach. Bullets kicked around them. Chips of stone cut and stung them. Chuck Tarbell was creased on the shoulder by a slug.

Frantically they heaped a wall of rocks at their backs. But it was pathetically small, barely eighteen inches high—not high enough for real protection.

Dane ordered Lonnie to lie flat behind this barrier. Then a bullet came down from the rim, grazing Dane.

"Lie close," he said. "They're up there already."

Lonnie sobbed wildly, realizing their plight. There was not room behind the rear barricade for all five. Hardly more than enough space to really shelter two bodies.

More slugs came whining, flattening on the big boulder. Dane crouched there, lips a thin slit, utterly unprotected.

"Four of 'em up there," he spat suddenly, for he had been marking the rifle flashes on the rim. "They've split their party. Can't be more than five or six in the brush. Come on, boys! We'll root 'em out of the brush. It's our only hope."

With a leap the four left her. They were heading for the thickets. Guns came to life in frantic chatter there as the attackers realized what was happening.

Lonnie saw Spot go down, then arise and crawl ahead. Chuck Tarbell spun, staggered, then fell also.

They made the brush, running like fiends. She heard yells, guns, panting coughs, the snarls of men. She ran also. As she plunged into a sumach thicket Tut Venters reared up. Lonnie pulled the trigger on her thirty-eight. Venters went down, a shocked expression on his face.

Reeling men crushed bushes nearby. She came in view of the fight. Dane and Owen Selig were at death grips. Their left hands locked opposing gun-wrists. They strained, their boot heels rammed far into the leaf mould. Muscles corded their necks, rose in bunches on their cheekbones. Lonnie could not shoot, for they were writhing around and around.

Then Selig began to bend. Dane was breaking him. Selig began to squeeze the trigger, trying to dip the gun down to blast his relentless opponent.

Then, with an effort of frenzied strength, Selig tore free. He fell to his knees and swung up his gun to empty his last shell point-blank into Dane.

But Dane fired first. His forty-five was so close that its flash seemed to obscure Selig's face. Lonnie never saw Owen Selig again, for his body dropped into the high grass.

SHE became conscious of yells and pounding hoofs. She saw her father on his big black saddle horse. And with him a dozen more men, all old friends of Big Doc's.

The fight had ended. No gun was being fired. She knew that the Arrow X men had been wiped out in the thickets.

"Lonnie," Big Doc bellowed, a choking note of thankfulness in his voice. "I got your note, an' figured I better come. We saw Selig's bunch on the mountain. Trailed 'em here. They left pieces of white paper to mark their route."

Then he whirled on his followers. "Some of you see if you can head those mavericks that was up on the rim. Bring 'em back dead if they won't come alive. The rest of you cast around an' fetch in the dead an' wounded."

He turned to Dane. "You can thank my daughter for this," he grinned. "I reckon you're an outlaw no longer. We got the deadwood on Selig. He left his horses back aways, an' we found some of the gold from the express car in the pockets of Selig's saddle. I reckon he was goin' to plant it on the bodies of you boys as evidence. But he was keepin' the lion's share for himself."

Wounded men were being lugged up. Spot and Chuck Tarbell and two of Selig's men were still alive. Only Johnny Merrick and Dane had escaped unscathed.

Big Doc worked on Spot and Chuck first. "They'll pull through," he finally grunted. "That breed is tough."

He blinked at Lonnie, discovered that her arms were around Dane.

"So that's why you believed in the Merricks, huh," he said. "Lucky you did. I reckon nobody else would ever have suspected that Selig an' his crew was the real outlaw bunch. No wonder Selig was gettin' rich faster than any man in this range."

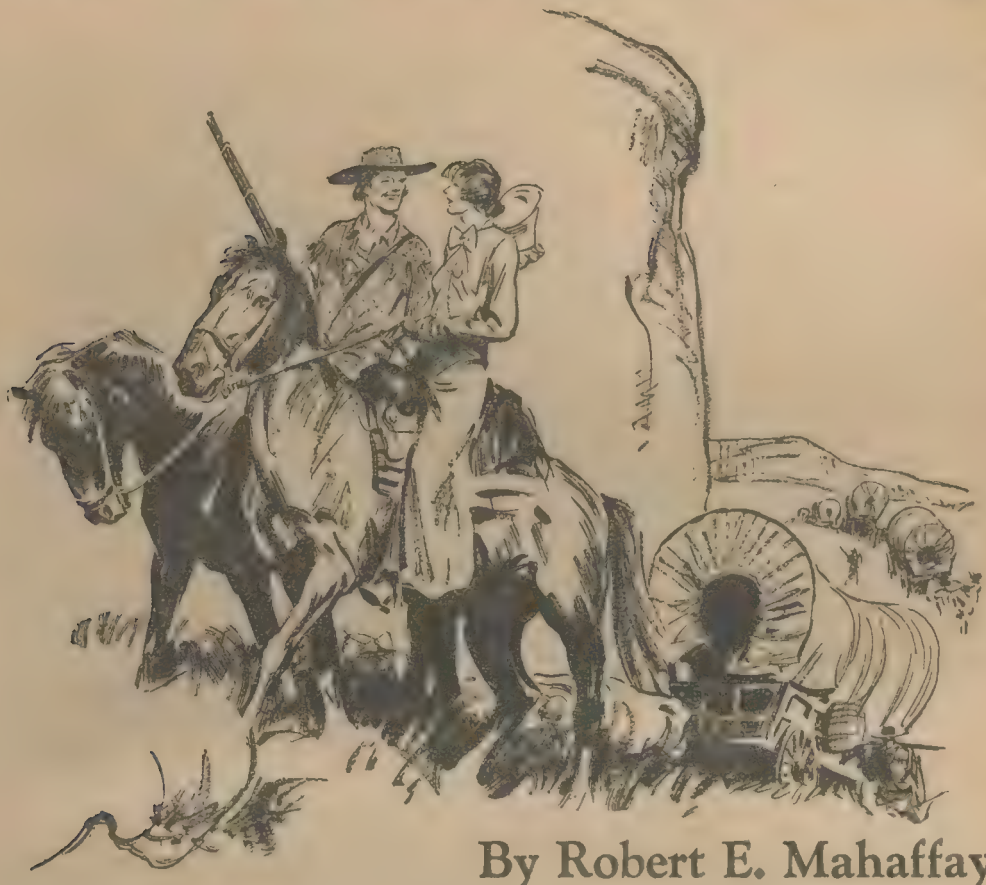
"This is a dream," Dane said huskily in Lonnie's ear. "One instant we're hunted men. Now it's all over, and we're done with this hiding and skulking."

"This isn't a dream," she said. "What happened before was the dream. I'll show you how real this is."

THE END

Another Novelette of Cow-country Romance by
CLIFF FARRELL
In the Coming Issue **Out July 19th!**

THE TRAIL TO HEARTBREAK



By Robert E. Mahaffay

Love such as Joyce Marlow had for Lane Kilrick would last forever, through desertion and despair and wagon-train treachery—and even the bitter heartbreak of her man's contempt. For Joyce was of that pioneer breed that saw past the rocky horizon to the promised land beyond!

THEY were riding together when it happened—that thing which came so close to being deadly and which led to such far-reaching and unpredictable disaster. They were riding together, perhaps a quarter mile in advance of the laboriously crawling wagon train, and there was a warm fire in Joyce Marlowe's lapis lazuli eyes as she listened to big Lane Kilrick pour out his heart to her.

The last weeks on the trail had been torture. The slowly-flowing Platte and the tumbling Sweetwater lay behind them. Around them rose the rugged heights and escarpments of the Rockies. And for the moment Joyce Marlowe was forgetting the hardships which had assailed them.

She was forgetting them in that delicious eagerness which comes to a woman when she knows that the man she loves is confiding in her, spreading out before her his life's hopes, his ambitions, the fears which live in him, and his courage. She felt that thrill of sure and confident admiration with which is mingled a heart-warming tenderness.

She listened now to the low, electric murmur of his voice, watched the quick floods of emotion which played unchecked across his tanned face. And remembering the ardent pressure of his lips on hers, she knew that Lane Kilrick loved her with as complete an abandon as she loved him.

She touched the brooch which lay against her breast. He had given her that brooch—an old-fashioned mounting in which were three rubies set about a diamond of singular brilliance. The rim of silver was fire-blackened, warped. There was a story behind it—a story of leaping hope fiercely quenched by death.

Joyce Marlowe's hand was still against the ornament when she heard Kilrick's voice break off short. Her eyes sought his in apprehension, caught the swift tightening of his jaw muscles, followed his unswerving gaze to a point high above them.

On a projecting knob of rock, outlined against the startling blue of the sky, an Indian warrior sat his pony. Stripped to the waist, he carried a carbine slung across his lap. He was staring down at the crawling string of canvas-topped wagons which lay in defile below him.

He was utterly motionless, but that immobility seemed to Joyce like a savage threat. She could feel the skin at the back of her neck tightening uncomfortably. Then Lane Kilrick was growling: "Hell of a place to mix with Injuns. No tellin' how many—"

Gone was romance. Surging back came those stark realities which had already dogged the little wagon train on the many miles of its trek.

Kilrick turned sharply, jabbing home his spurs, and Joyce raced by his side, back toward the sluggish wagons which rocked on the uneven trail like windjammers on a choppy sea. She turned once to look behind her, but the lone warrior had vanished. And though he was gone, she still felt the brooding terror inspired by his presence.

THAT feeling of chill was relieved as she looked at Kilrick, bent low against his mount's neck, racing with no heed for the perilous footing. She knew that he was not alarmed but purposeful. The fate of those lives jolting in the wagon train rested with him. He had been talking to her about that. As captain and guide, his was the responsibility.

Fear in her heart gave way to pride that Lane Kilrick was the man she loved. Young though he was, it was said on the Trail that there was no better man than Lane Kilrick between Omaha and the Columbia River.

They swept up to the wagons and Joyce could see her father plodding by the side of the lead span. His head, with its shaggy crop of gray hair, moved from side to side like the restless heads of the gaunt oxen beside him.

Lane Kilrick's command snapped back along the line. "Injuns, Marlowe! Swing around! Pull 'em into a circle!"

"Injuns?" demanded Ab Marlowe. "Damn' if I kin see any, Kilrick." He pulled in the willing oxen, but made no move to turn them.

"Most of the time it's too late when you do," Kilrick jerked impatiently. "Pull around, Marlowe!"

Ab Marlowe squinted at the bleak slabs of rock which hemmed them in and then at the westering sun. "Gittin' along toward sundown," he objected, "an' there ain't no water here. Ain't no redskins, neither, far as I kin see. Hell, boy, you're gittin' scairt 'fore you're hurt."

He spat judicially. Other men were hurrying up from farther back along the stalled prairie schooners.

"Hurry, Dad," Joyce put in sharply. "I saw the Indian—back there."

To Joyce, the action of her father was nothing unusual. She saw only his customary indecisiveness, his customary desire to weigh matters with a false knowingness. The men he worked with called Ab Marlowe a fool; harmless and honest, but a fool. He had little learning or little ability. Yet he was fond of assuming that he had both. His own ideas were valueless, but he hesitated in accepting the ideas of others. While he bore no resentment toward Lane Kilrick, he felt that his age entitled him to a consideration which he had not received. Joyce had grown so accustomed to his peculiarities that she accepted them as a matter of course. The seriousness of the present situation was not fully apparent to her, for the wagon train had thus far been spared an attack by hostiles.

Ab Marlowe caught up his daughter's remark contemptuously. "Only one Injun? One Injun never hurt nobody. Me, I'm for goin' on till we hit water an' feed."

Lane Kilrick's face had gone hard. "Pull your wagon around like I said, Marlowe, or by God, I will!" He swung down and took a step toward the older man.

Driven so far now that his false pride would not allow him to back down, Ab Marlowe persisted stubbornly. "Hold on, young feller. This here's my outfit. I'll put 'er when I'm a mind to. I'm plumb outa water, an' I'm goin' on till I find some."

"Lane! Don't!" cried Joyce suddenly.

But her words came too late. With a horrified helplessness she watched Kilrick's fist whip forward, snap against the point of her father's jaw. Ab Marlowe fell straight backward. His head struck against the big iron-tired wheel and he rolled over on his face.

Confusion sprang up along the length of the train. Men were shouting. The word that Kilrick had brought fled back from tongue to tongue. Here and there the piping wail of a child pierced the heavier sounds. Kilrick slapped the ends of the reins hard over the rumps of the oxen and the Marlowe wagon cut to the left, the wheels screeching as they rasped against the box.

In that moment of panic Ab Marlowe was forgotten. Joyce had leaped from her saddle and had pulled him away from the grinding wheels. Obscured by the dust which boiled and eddied about them, she knelt by her father, wiping away the blood which streamed over his face from the split in his scalp. . . .

BUT with the wagons set for defense, no Indians appeared. And a thorough scouting of the surrounding crags failed to reveal any. So at noon the next day the wagon train headed on through the defile, plunging deeper into the mountains. For two days Joyce saw little of Lane Kilrick. The going was rougher than any they had yet experienced. From before dawn until dark Kilrick had half a hundred duties which engaged him. Joyce herself was driving the Marlowe outfit. Her father had not recovered from the wound he had suffered when his head struck the wheel. He lay in the hot interior of the wagon, querulous, pale, weak. The strength was not flowing back into his body as it should have, and Joyce fought off a sickening fear that he would never be strong again.

During the dull, endless hours as she stared down at the sluggishly moving backs of the oxen or up at the gaunt, towering hills, her resentment of Lane Kilrick, which a few tender words might have allayed, mounted slowly.

She knew in her heart that Kilrick had done only what he had to do. The lives of all of them might have depended on his quick and decisive action. But the thought of her father, hurt and helpless, tended to overcome that sane understanding of Kilrick's action.

Occasionally her hand would stray to the silver brooch at her breast. She knew its history, and that gave her further reason to excuse Kilrick. It had belonged to Lane Kilrick's mother, and its fire-blackened rim was a grim reminder of the fate which had befallen her. Ten years before the Kilricks, too, had been trekking across the plains, bound for California. There had been an Indian raid and Lane Kilrick, wounded, had watched flaming arrows destroy all that was dear to him in the world. A boy of sixteen, he had buried his father and mother on the wind-whipped prairie and gone on. The brooch was all he had to remind him of them.

He had told Joyce the story when he gave her the brooch, and she had known that he was giving her a thing which he valued as much as his life.

There was still another thing which brought her uneasiness. Under the terrific strain of the long, hard drive the spirit of the wagon train was breaking. Kilrick had spoken to her about that, the cause for such a thing. But now that it was actually happening it seemed infinitely more real, more dangerous. Men and women who had set out so gallantly in the hope of finding new homes were becoming weary, distressed. It seemed that the harsh rigors of the pull through the mountains would never be done with. Morning after morning dawned on fresh crags, seemingly unscalable, on a trail which was increasingly tortuous; a trail which tore at the strength of man and beast, deadening the will and the heart.

Joyce Marlowe fought off that desperate feeling. Yet bit by bit it lay insidious hold of her.

As she drove she could hear someone talking to her father in the wagon behind her.

"Lost the trail, that's what he's done," a man was saying. "Comes of puttin' a younker to bossin' when they's growed men to be had."

Then Joyce would hear her father's querulous reply, his voice dry and weak. "Seems like there oughta be a easier way'n this. Don't seem to be gettin' nowhere."

"'Course we ain't, Marlowe," the answer came. "I been tellin' ye that. He's headin' wrong, only he's too damn' stubborn to say so. We ain't hit water in three days now. An' he's got a bloody high-handed way about him for a gent who ain't doin' no better by us than he is."

There was the noise of Ab Marlowe's restless stirring. "He didn't have no call to hit me like he done."

"Hell, no. What'd he do it for, I'm askin' ye. There weren't no Injuns. Nary a sign of 'em. Did ye ever figger, Marlowe, that maybe he's aimin' to git that money ye're totin' along with ye?"

JOYCE knew the owner of that voice. It was Jed Dyer, who had joined the caravan only a week or so before. Though he was a powerful, bull-necked man, his manner was whining and obsequious. He would grin crookedly rather than take up an argument with his fists or his gun. On his third day out he had lashed the oxen of his mired wagon until the blood ran from their backs. That was the first time Joyce had seen Lane Kilrick angry. He had threatened to take the whip to Dyer, and would have, had not Dyer struck an attitude so abject that Kilrick turned away in disgust. Joyce had seen the look on Dyer's face as he stared at Lane Kilrick's back.

Now Joyce herself grew angry that the man should be talking to her father and that her father should be listening so willingly.

She turned and looked into the wagon which was gloomy under the canvas hood. "You, Dyer! You're lying!" she said furiously. "Get out of there an' leave dad alone."

He grinned at her ingratiatingly. "I ain't meanin' no harm, Joyce. We're talkin' facts, that's all. Me, I know this here country like the palm of my hand. We're headin' wrong."

Joyce disliked even the sound of her name on the man's thick lips. His bulging eyes were devouring her greedily, and she resented it hotly. His gaze traveled over the dark luster of her hair, only partly obscured by her tied sunbonnet, down the lines of her well-modelled face and throat, and over the curves of her body which the calico could not conceal. Joyce Marlowe had never thought of herself as an unusually beautiful girl, but Dyer's gaze made her burningly conscious of it.

"I told you to get out," she cried. "Now do it."

Jed Dyer scrambled over the tail-board. "Ye'll do well to think on it," was his parting shot. "The right trail lies to the south. Kilrick's takin' us wrong, an' there's a reason for it."

"You hadn't ought to talk to Jed that way," Ab Marlowe complained. "He's a friend of ours. An' I'm thinkin' there's somethin' in what he says. What'd Kilrick want to go hittin' me for, anyhow?"

Beneath her the wagon rumbled steadily. The heavy wooden yokes of the oxen creaked. "Go to sleep, Dad," said Joyce wearily. "We'll talk about it tonight. Maybe you'll feel better then."

LATER that afternoon Lane Kilrick stopped for a moment, on his way to help with a wagon which had broken an axle. His young, roughly handsome face was drawn, as if he had been sleeping little. Worry had traced new lines about his eyes, but their gaze was as straightforward as ever, and there was a glow in them which made Joyce's breath come more swiftly.

"Haven't seen much of you, honey," he said half apologetically. "Know I still love you, don't you?"

She nodded slowly. She wanted to cry out passionately that she loved him, too, that she believed in him. She wanted desperately to feel those powerful arms of his crushing her to him, reassuring her. She wanted him to whisper to her, while her soft cheek lay against his rough one. But a horrible weight seemed to be depressing her. Though she did not believe them, Jed Dyer's words hung about her like an evil cloud which will-power could not dispel.

It was not what she wanted to say, but the question slipped out: "Lane, you're not—not lost?"

She was frightened at the change which came over him then, at the steely brightness which came into his eyes, at the bleak hardness which enveloped the lower part of his face. But his voice was a strange contrast. It was low, perfectly sure.

"Some of them are saying worse than that," he told her. "They're sayin' that—well, it don't matter. I'll tell you this, honey: I promised I'd take this outfit through to Oregon, an' I'll do it—all of 'em that wants to go!"

Neither of them spoke for minutes after that, and then Kilrick said: "How's Ab?"

"Not much better, I reckon, Lane. Seems like his head hit the wheel—" A sob prevented her from finishing.

"Sorry—about that," he muttered awkwardly. "Once we're through the hills, things'll be diff'rent. Oregon—well, you'll like it there, Joyce. Ain't like no place you ever seen. Ab'll git well fast. You an' me'll have that place I was tellin' you about." He looked up at her and the hardness in his face melted away as he smiled. "Love me, kid?"

"Oh, I do, Lane," she whispered. "I do love you."

OTHER days flowed leadenly past and Joyce Marlowe had a queer sensation of impending defeat. It was nothing she could explain, but an intangible, vicious

threat hovered over the wagon train. Rumors, subtle charges flitted from one wagon to another. The courage of that little band of souls, barred from their goal by seemingly endless mountain peaks, harried by a succession of tribulations was seeping away. Panic was fighting to break through the last thin crust of assurance. Jed Dyer moved among the men like a slinking shadow. He spent long hours whispering with Ab Marlowe. Joyce had given up trying to drive him away, overborne by her father's irritable protests. Her only consolation was the occasional glimpses she caught of Lane Kilrick. Though he must have known what was going on, he moved among the sorely-tried members of the party, steady as a rock, consoling, helping where he could.

But with a ghastly certainty Joyce Marlowe knew that a blow-up was coming, that it could not be averted.

And come it did, with a suddenness which was shocking, with results which pointed to heart-break and disaster.

Joyce Marlowe was doling out a fragment of their scanty water supply to her father when she got the first inkling of it. It was night, and from the leaping fire came the rising hum of troubled voices. Something warned her of its meaning; she slipped outside, unmindful of the chill mountain air, and ran toward it. Her heart was hammering like a wild thing in her breast.

The ruddy glare of the flames lighted up dusty foreheads, cheek-bones, bearded jaws. All of the men were gathered there, and hovering in the background, silent, perturbed, were the women. The frightened cry of a child was smothered instantly in its mother's skirts. From the hillside beyond came the undertone of the feeding oxen, and from farther up drifted the spine-tingling wail of coyotes.

Out a little from the rest, facing each other, were two men—Lane Kilrick and Jed Dyer. Kilrick's fists were clenched. Dyer's thick body was cringing, but he did not retreat.

"You damned sneak-thief," Kilrick was saying. "So you went through my stuff, did you?"

"An' damn' lucky I did," cried Dyer acidly. "If'n I hadn't, we'd all uh walked into your trap an' most likely been robbed an' killed."

Kilrick took a step forward, his right fist drawing back. His face shone very white, even in the red glow.

"Go ahead. Hit me," Dyer sneered. "You'd like to, wouldn't you? You'd like to put me out of the way like ye done to Ab Marlowe?"

Kilrick's fist dropped to his side. His eyes dropped and he stood motionless, staring into the fire. Then he said steadily, "You ought to be killed, Dyer. You're a crooked, sneaking rat."

Jed Dyer's whiskered lips curled unpleasantly. "'Fore ye go to callin' names, maybe ye'll explain this," he exclaimed, and Joyce saw for the first time that he was clenching a dirty scrap of paper in his hand. "Bein' as how it was in your war-sack, you better. You ain't the only gent knows this here country, Kilrick. I been wonderin' why ye're taking us wrong. We're gittin' so deep in the hills we'll never git out." Dyer turned toward the men who hemmed them in in a silent circle and his voice rasped on. "Seein' as the rest of ye was fooled, I looked for myself. Me, I wasn't hankerin' to git my throat cut. This here note is from the rest of Kilrick's gang, tellin' him to take us past Broken Knife Butte. I ain't needin' to tell ye what'd happen when we got there. There wouldn't none of us come back. Hell, the real trail's eighty mile to the south of us. I know, 'cause I been over it. What ye got to say to that, Kilrick?"

Lane Kilrick did not even look at Dyer. To Joyce, staring at him with a bewildered

fascination, his face had never seemed so stern, his shoulders so broad, his body so strongly erect.

When he spoke it was to the men who had clustered about him in the firelight.

"Boys," he said slowly. "I'd like to kill this—thing here. If I thought it'd settle your minds any, I'd do it. But I reckon it wouldn't. I ain't carin' about the letter. If he found it in my sack, he planted it there. We've had tough goin' so far, an' prob'ly we'll have more of it. But it ain't any worse than lots of folks have had ahead of us. When we started out I guaranteed I'd take you to Oregon. That still goes. I ain't forcin' nobody. If there's one wagon wants to go with me I'll take it through like I promised."

"Take it through to hell," Dyer sneered.

Kilrick went on as if he had not heard. "Each of you got to do the decidin'. Dyer wants to turn south. You can do that, or hit on through with me. Talk it over, boys." He pushed through the circle of men, out of the dancing firelight, and the darkness swept around him.

THE meaning of it struck Joyce Marlowe with bewildering force. Those conferences between Jed Dyer and her father. It meant—God in Heaven!—it meant that the Marlowe wagon would be leaving with Dyer. She would be leaving Lane Kilrick!

For one wild moment she dared to think of abandoning her father, going with Kilrick at all hazards. Then with a feeling of agonized despair she knew that, helpless as he was, she could not.

The sound of frantic, hushed voices boiling through the little encampment, the hurrying figures of men and women, had no effect upon her then. It seemed to her that she was utterly alone in a world of silence and that she had lost the man she loved. She fled into the darkness in the direction he had taken, but her throat was so tight she could not call out and she could not find him.

She stumbled back to the wagon, oblivious to all the sights and sounds of that night, climbed into it and felt about for a tallow candle. By its dim and wavering light she saw the still figure of her father and crouching beside him the hunched form of Jed Dyer.

He looked up at Joyce, his bulging eyes glittering in the candlelight, and grinned crookedly. Bending over, he began to make his way over the duffle to the rear. "Got some more folks to see, but I'll be back," he promised.

As he came close to Joyce he tripped, or pretended to, and fell against her. With that excuse his hands pawed at her bosom and she could feel his hot breath against her cheek. Furiously she struck at him.

He grinned crookedly and jumped down to the ground. She could hear his feet stamping away. "Joy, girl," her father quavered. "I got somethin' to tell you."

She knew what it was, and instead of answering she threw herself down, her head in her arms, trying to halt her sobs.

Much later she was roused by a voice calling to her from the end of the wagon. The sound thrilled her painfully. The camp was very still, and outlined against the star-studded night sky she saw Lane Kilrick's head and shoulders. She went to him with a quick little gasp of happiness. He swung her down and they walked away together from the circle of wagons.

Then his arms went round her with a contained fierceness, and his lips were seeking hers, hungrily, passionately. Joyce lay against his shoulder, unable to speak, torn between consuming grief and an ecstasy of happiness and longing. In the darkness her slim fingers ran over his eyes, his lips, his cheeks which were prickly with unshaven beard. She closed

her eyes and forgot all else for a moment in the unutterable joy of being near to him, so close that she could feel his heart beating against her body. She wanted never to move from there.

It was his voice at last, strained and hoarse, which stirred her.

"Five outfits," he said slowly, "are pullin' out with Dyer—in the mornin'. I got to let 'em go, I reckon. There was a spurt of anger in Kilrick's tone. "I talked to Ab. He won't change. Dyer put those ideas into his head. Ab swears he'll go with Dyer."

"I can't leave dad, Lane. I—I can't do it. If he tried to drive now, like he is, I don't know what would happen to him."

She was weeping silently. She could feel his hand moving through the dark strands of her hair which had loosened and come out of its coils.

"I know, honey. But I'll look for you—when I'm through with this. Maybe a month from now. Wherever you are, I'll find you. I love you, darling, so much that I won't be alive till I find you again."

But the words brought little relief to Joyce Marlowe. What terrors lay ahead for her with Jed Dyer guiding the party she could only guess. They would be heading by different routes into a country so vast it seemed futile to hope that she would meet again the man she loved. A vague premonition that she would see Lane Kilrick for the last time when they parted in the morning overcame her. She clung to him, desperately. . . .

Lying under the dark canopy of the wagon top Joyce Marlowe went over word by word those things Lane Kilrick had said to her. Again and again she spoke them to herself, as if there were some magic in them which would relieve the gnawing hurt in her breast.

And then her hand went up to the one thing which Kilrick had given her—the brooch. The diamond and the rubies set in the ancient silver mounting which had such a tragic history. It was the one link with her love which would be left to her.

Then, sharply, she sat bolt upright. The brooch was gone.

Wearily she tried to focus her mind on that fact. The shock of the knowledge, coupled with the other events of the night, set her brain to whirling. She knew that she was tired, terribly tired, and her shoulders fell back against the blankets, and at last she was asleep.

THE dawn which broke over the mountains was sharp and incredibly clear. One by one the five wagons which were destined to follow Jed Dyer broke away from the main party. Joyce Marlowe was the last to go. She had seen Lane Kilrick only for the briefest moment, and then—she had not dared to tell him about the loss of the brooch. She knew only too well how much it meant to him.

Beneath her the heavy wheels groaned on their axles. The iron tires clattered against rock, and the big prairie schooner began its incessant rocking and jolting. The oxen plodded steadily, heads swinging. Among the human beings a tense quiet prevailed, as if those going on and those going back pitied each other alike.

When Joyce last saw Kilrick he was sitting astride his horse, motionless, staring after her until a shelf of rock obliterated the rounded hood of the wagon.

A day rolled slowly by, and then another. It was hard for Joyce to comprehend that she was being cut off utterly, and probably forever, from Lane Kilrick. The full realization of that, penetrating slowly, stunned her, dragged the life bit by bit out of her body. She took interest in nothing, went about her grueling work mechanically. Something in her had died when she left Lane Kilrick.

On the evening of the second day four men rode into the little canyon in which the five wagons had made camp. They greeted Dyer in an offhand manner which suggested that they had met before. They were hard looking customers, ragged, but well mounted and armed. After strolling among the wagons and eyeing them appraisingly, they returned to the fire and squatted there on their heels, talking in low tones to Dyer.

That there was physical danger in their appearance did not occur to Joyce Marlowe. Their coming, in fact, was the spark needed to restore her to herself. They presented a tangible problem, one with which she could cope. She did not go to the fire, but studied the newcomers from the protection of the canvas top.

After a time Jed Dyer left them huddled by the flames and walked to the Marlowe wagon. Joyce lit a candle, and its light made huge, awkward shadows on the canvas covering.

"Well, Marlowe," Dyer grunted, "it's money they're after."

"Money?" demanded Ab Marlowe helplessly. "Who are they?"

Dyer shrugged. "Hard-cases from the gold camps. Law's howlin' after 'em some place, most likely. They're after money or they claim they won't let us through."

"What did you tell them?" put in Joyce.

Dyer's bulging eyes roved shrewdly to her. "What'd I tell 'em? Why, that I'd talk it over with the rest, o' course."

"Meanin' us, because dad's got the money. Well, go an' tell them they can pull their freight out of here."

The blood was rising in Joyce's cheeks. All of her grief, her damned-up longing, was being transmuted into anger. She stared hard at Jed Dyer's sneering face.

"Ye're talkin' foolish," Dyer grunted. "I say it'd be a heap easier to give 'em what they want. They're plenty bad, them gents. If'n we don't, they're liable to tear this here outfit to pieces, which would be a heap more unpleasant fer you"—his protruding eyes were glowing hotly—"than forkin' over a little cash."

"Joy, girl," Ab Marlowe interrupted quaveringly. "There's four of 'em, you told me. We got to think—"

"You've got everything else," said Joyce bitterly to Dyer. "You won't get the money. Go back an' tell them that." Her voice rose passionately. "So this is what you were after all the time, is it? You knew these men were waiting here. You—you've done what you accused Lane Kilrick of going to do!"

Jed Dyer spread his hands placatingly. "Nothin' to git all het up about," he warned. "There'll be trouble if ye do. You got your old man here to think about, an' the rest of the folks here that wants to git off easy as they can. You make a fuss, an' there'll be hell to pay."

"You'll get nothing more from us, Jed Dyer," cried Joyce furiously. "Now get out of here."

"Think it over," countered Dyer roughly. "Mebbe I kin hold 'em off till mornin." He shambled off.

"Looks like," quavered Ab Marlowe, "looks like I made a mistake, Joy. We better give 'em the money so's they'll let us go. I wouldn't want nothin' to happen—"

"Don't worry about me," said Joyce huskily. "We'll be needin' that money when we get to Oregon. We're goin' to keep it and we're goin' to get there."

SHE fumbled by the blankets which covered her father, found his gun and cartridge belt, buckled the weapon about her slim waist. Then she slipped out into the night and visited each of the other wagons. When she returned she had learned that if it came to a fight she would not be fighting alone.

Joyce Marlowe slept but fitfully that

night, and long before dawn she was wide awake, her open eyes staring into the darkness. Oddly, she was not afraid.

Then light was sifting gently over the peaks, and she could hear the four strangers and Jed Dyer cooking their breakfast at the big fire. Even then Joyce did not get up. She pulled the six-gun from its holster, cocked it and lay holding it in her hand by her side.

She heard Dyer calling something to the other four. She got to her feet mechanically and from the front of the wagon watched him come toward her. His servile manner had vanished. He was swaggering and that repulsive, crooked grin was on his face. It reminded Joyce of what Kilrick had said: "I'd like to kill this—thing." A peculiar stony calm had come over her. She lifted the gun.

She was waiting for him when he reached the wagon.

He had snarled out: "Well, what's it goin' to be?" before he saw the gun.

"Get a horse and ride out of here, an' take those men with you," she said icily.

"Ferget it, kid. Ye ain't got a chance. Put that gun down or I'll—"

Joyce shot. She was startled by the thunderous roar of the explosion. The entire hooded interior of the wagon seemed to be filled with the spurting flame and the hanging powder smoke. An expression of snarling astonishment leaped into Dyer's face. Yelling, he stumbled backwards, one of his hands flying up to a smashed collar-bone. He turned tail and ran before Joyce could shoot again.

She heard shouts from the fire, heard the pound of boots. Those sounds were cut off by the crack of a rifle. That would be Sandy McCarver, she guessed. He had been watching. . . .

One of the four charging renegades went down with a bullet in his thigh; he crawled off into a gully, leaving a trail of blood. The others scattered.

Then minutes later, waving a semi-white strip of cloth, Jed Dyer stood up behind a ledge of rock. "You get one more chance," he called. "Surrender an' I'll guarantee ye don't none of ye git killed. If ye don't, we'll wipe ye out."

No answer came from the grouped wagons. The morning air hung hot and heavy and still.

"All right," screamed Dyer. "Let 'em have it!"

JOYCE MARLOWE had no true conception afterwards of what happened then. Lead hammered at the oak sideboards of the wagons. The crash of exploding guns echoed and rolled among the hills like the wild din in some insane nightmare. It was all horribly unreal, and it seemed that it would be endless. The interior of the wagon became a simmering cauldron, stifling, smoke-filled.

A great weariness came over Joyce Marlowe. As the afternoon wore on, that stony courage which had come to her went trickling away. And with it was going her fierce desire to live. So much had happened to hurt her. She ceased to think, or care, about what would happen after nightfall.

Apparently, however, Jed Dyer did not intend to delay until that time. She heard him bawling: "They've had all they want. Ride in an' finish it!" It was true.

Joyce heard the rattle of charging hoofs. Then that warning sound became a confused jumble. From a distance came the steady bark of a rifle.

Through a slit in the canvas she had cut with a knife Joyce looked out. Caught in the open, the renegades were without protection. That accurate fire from above sought out two of them, knocked them out of their saddles. Jed Dyer's horse went down under him. He stumbled to his feet, looked wildly after the two remaining desperadoes who were in full flight, spun around and charged on for

the Marlowe wagon, his gun flaming.

Joyce Marlowe steadied her gun, tried to do it as coolly as she knew Lane Kilrick would have done, and with the knowledge that it was a thing which must be done.

She pulled the trigger with a finger which did not tremble. Jed Dyer stumbled —fell a dozen feet away and lay on his face, a bullet hole through his forehead.

Then Joyce Marlowe was tripping, falling, blinded by tears as she hurried to leave the wagon. Colossal, unutterable relief was sweeping over her. Without seeing him, something told her who that distant rifleman was. She watched him come riding down the wooded, rocky slope, erect and powerful in the saddle, the rifle across his saddle-bow.

HER heart was too brimming with happiness to note the look that was in Lane Kilrick's eyes, or to see that he dismounted stiffly, as if with reluctance. She flung herself into his arms, and it was only when the first obliterating ecstasy of the moment was gone that she noticed his body was rigid as stone, and as cold, and that he had spoken not a word to her.

Oblivious to the other members of the party who were crowding close to them, she caught him by both shoulders with her hands, frightened beyond belief. She could scarcely force her voice above a whisper. "Lane! Lane! What is it?"

He reached into a pocket and extended his hand, palm upward, toward her. In it lay a twisted and battered object of silver. It was the mounting of the brooch; the gems had been wrenched out of it.

"All I came for was the jewels," he said slowly. "They weren't mine to give —anyone, you know."

"Lane," she cried imploringly. "I didn't do that. I—I couldn't. You must believe that, Lane."

His voice was shaking, but he did not raise his eyes to hers. "I want them," was all he said. "I can put them back the way they were. Give them to me."

The cruel unfairness of it crushed her. Then out of her misery came a picture, stark and clear. It was the memory of that time in the wagon when Jed Dyer had purposefully fallen against her. She remembered the revolting touch of his hands on her bosom. It was then that she must have lost the brooch. Kilrick had called Dyer a sneak thief. He was that. It was he who had stolen the brooch. He must have pried out the jewels and thrown away the valueless silver mounting. Kilrick had found the mounting and had thought that she had done it.

Heedless of the others near them, Joyce Marlowe poured out the story.

She saw Lane Kilrick's face change, saw emotions warring for dominance there. He wanted to believe; he was telling himself that he must believe.

In a buckskin sack around Jed Dyer's neck they found the diamond and the three rubies.

Then it was he who held out his arms to her. It was he who showered half-rough, half-tender kisses upon her willing lips. And his words told her of a love which was as great as she had dreamed it would be. . . .

Again the coals of a great fire glowed redly in the night, and again the two sat at a distance, staring into them. But this time they were illuminating fresh, surging hopes instead of a shattered love.

"I'd have come sooner," he told her softly, "but I had to find a place to leave the wagons, where they'd be safe. When I think—how close—"

"You came," she whispered. "That was enough."

HEARTS COURAGEOUS!

By George Armin Shaftel

(Author of "Wilderness Caravan," etc.)

When day looked blackest in that outlaw den below the Border, when death seemed the only escape from dishonor, Mary Barton still held to the code of her pioneer family: To the brave comes victory, to the steadfast comes love—though both must be bought with flying bullets and the agony of heartbreak.

THE rodeo crowd booed and jeered the rider on the big piebald horse in the arena. Mary Barton, up in the judges' stand beside her uncle, watched with fright in her blue eyes. Fervently she was praying to herself, for she knew what that piebald outlaw could do.

The huge bronc stood "sulling." He had come out of the chute like a whirlwind overdue in hell. For a while he had humped and gyrated through a spine-breaking series of plunges. But big Brad

A Romantic Novelette of Love in the Border Country

Prentiss had taken it all in time and in tune, fanning the piebald's wicked ears and raking him from shoulder to rump. Abruptly the outlaw had stopped. And now he stood as if rooted into his tracks, refusing to buck.

"Take that hoss out and feed 'im buckwheat!"

"A *statue,* by grab!"

"You hypnotized 'im, Brad?"

The jeers rasped across Mary's nerves. Once she had owned that powerful black-and-white gelding with the flowing white mane and tail. She had sold him because he was so vicious. She knew what treachery was in him. And she prayed that the tall, sandy-haired rider would be alert enough to save himself when the outlaw broke loose.

A roar burst from the crowd. Mary screamed. For, with appalling suddenness, the horse "throwed sideways." Flung himself flat to ground in effort to pin the rider beneath him and crush him. But Brad Prentiss landed on his feet, astride the piebald's belly—and as the horse surged erect, Prentiss was again snug in saddle.

A deafening roar of applause burst from the holiday throng.

"That's ridin' him, boy!" they whooped.

"Stick 'im, Brad, and the prize money is your'n!"

Abruptly, then, the shouting ceased.

Quiet, taut with horror and suspense, froze the crowd.

"It's come!" Mary gasped.

The piebald was rearing up on his hind legs. Rearing up out of the sun-hot dust, pawing for a cloud and trumpeting like a demon. Straight up he stood for an instant that was like an eternity—then he flung backward. . . .

Brad Prentiss lifted one foot from the stirrup and with sinewy grace swung from saddle, just as the timekeeper's pistol barked. Somehow he managed to land on his feet as Magpie crashed into the dust. Prentiss leaped clear . . . while the crowd whooped in applause.

Prentiss was ushered into the judge's stand.

Mary, her blue eyes shining, gazed raptly at the stalwart rider as the judges shook his hand and presented him with the grand prize of five hundred dollars. A tall man of thirty, Brad Prentiss had broad shoulders and a resilient grace in his every move. His lean features were of a thoughtful, brooding cast, with crinkles of humor about his keen gray eyes and an upward quirk to his lips that hinted at easy laughter.

He took the hundred-dollar bills, and bowed his thanks.

Mary moved toward him as he started to leave. "That was a nice ride, Mr. Prentiss," she said softly.

He reached out, almost gropingly, and took her arm. In a whisper hoarse with pain, he said, "Let me hang onto you a minute. I'm groggy, and—oh, a girl!" he realized, moving away.

"Please, do let me help!" she said, alarmed.

"Help me git to my blue roan hoss, by the stables," he whispered; and, with an embarrassment that touched her to the heart, he explained: "The doc warned me to ease up on bronc-bustin'. It's pounded the gristle thin between the joints of my backbone. Ridin' a snorty bronc jars my spine all askew and the bones press on nerves. For a day or so I get palsy and blind staggers like a pinto full of locoweed. My sight's all blurry."

She helped him find his bronc, and swing into saddle. As he mounted, his prize money and a leather pouch fell from his vest. "My pocketbook?" he asked anxiously.

Mary put the five hundred-dollar bills into the pouch and thrust it into his shirt pocket. "You'll get home all right?"

"Sure. Bontai will go straight to his corral. Thanks, *amigo.*" Their hands met in a firm clasp.

Mary gazed after him as he rode southward, his sandy head held high. Her blue eyes were tender, dreamy. . . .

AT home, next day, Mary asked her lanky, elderly uncle: "Chuck, Brad Prentiss lives at Pintado Wells, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. Why, kid?"

"I'm going to be neighborly and visit him," Mary said as she pulled a sombrero over her shining red-brown hair.

Chuck Barton flung down his newspaper in sudden wrath. "Smokes, kid, don't you have no truck with that nester! He bought out the Texan who squatted on your land at the Wells. It's some of the best range your dad ever owned. Prentiss is a grass-hog. He's a crook!"

"He's *not,* Chuck!" Mary cried, her lovely blue eyes startled and unbelieving. "Not *knowingly.*"

"Call him a sucker, then. That squatter sold the spread to Prentiss, cheap, because that squatter knew the law would make him give you back that land. There'll be a court fight, and Prentiss will be kicked off."

"He won't!" Mary said impulsively. "That would be a shame. He—probably put all his savings into that little ranch.

Chuck. You tell Mart Cagle to stop legal proceedings against Prentiss at once!"

Barton gawked at her, open-mouthed, his faded blue eyes popping.

Mary's sweet face reddened. Hastily, before old Chuck's tongue could unknot into rapid-fire again, she belted her leather jacket about her supple waist and left the room.

As she walked down the path toward the corrals, she passed a stoop-shouldered Mexican in overalls and a jumper two sizes too large for him. His head was wrapped Apache-fashion in a red bandana; whiskers covered his swarthy face in a gray stubble.

"Buenas noches, Señorita," he said so humbly. And he looked so gaunt and starved, that Mary paused and told him to go to the kitchen and ask Sam Ling for food. And she assured him that her uncle needed hands for ditch work.

"Gracias," the Mexican murmured.

Mary went on. But the Mexican did not go to the kitchen. He went to the front door. Chuck Barton answered his soft knock. Lanky old Chuck started at sight of the Mexican.

"Come in, Salazar!"

Salazar entered. A subtle, yet tremendous change came over him. The ingratiating timidity fled from his dark, gaunt face. He straightened up stiff as a ramrod, adding inches and a truculent swagger of importance. He bore himself as if he wore a tailored uniform and his chest was dazzling with medals.

"Señor Barton, you have the supplies?"

"Yeah, Colonel. I'll haul 'em out to you Saturday night."

"Bueno. I will meet you with a dozen men. Same time, same place—"

"And same *price,* in advance," said Chuck Barton.

Salazar's swarthy face tightened. *"Amigo,* I could pay you in gold—"

"In gold bullion stolen from mines, or doodads raided from churches!" snapped old Chuck. "How'd I explain ownin' such stuff? No siree bob. I'm a cowman. You'll pay me in money I can slap my own brand onto and drive to market."

"Señor, perhaps you give me credit, no? Later, we give you land concessions—"

"Huh-uh, nix, *nada!*" said old Chuck. "Your greaser politics is too dizzy for me to monkey with. Look at you! Last year, you were the big boss of the *Rurales,* busy chasin' bandits. This year, you're just a two-fer-nickel Pancho Villa electioneerin' for office with loot and bullets—a bandit, busy dodgin' *Rurales!*"

"Amigo, when my party is in power," Salazar said stiffly, "then we make reforms—"

Old Chuck grinned like a whiskered cherub.

"Oh, yeah?" he said. . . .

MARY rode west from her home ranch. She rode at an eager trot over a long sagebrush bench, then angled south between the Cibalo Buttes and dropped down into Pintado Valley.

A little house stood on the bank of the dry creek, near a *bosque* of cottonwoods. Beyond was a pole corral, empty.

Mary dismounted, and knocked on the door. She knocked again, and fear gathered about her heart as no answer came.

Lifting the latch, she entered and darted to the bunk across the main room. A sigh of profound relief eased from her lips as she saw that the bunk was empty. Brad wasn't home, that was all. He was not sick, dying, as she had feared.

She looked around the house, a typical desert structure—a three-room 'dobe with a small kitchen detached from the house, and connected with it by a covered porch. Both buildings were roofed with split tree trunks on which *saccaton* grass had been laid and covered with earth for coolness.

In one window hung a great red *olla,* an earthen jar for drinking water, cooled by evaporation. Deer antlers on the walls furnished pegs for clothes. To Mary, the house looked dreary as a barracks.

"A man living alone is just camping out," she reflected.

A broom stood in a corner. She swept the place, made the bunk up neatly and washed the stack of dishes. She cleaned cobwebs from the ceiling and corners, and as she worked, she pondered the lack of comforts here. Brad, obviously, was poor.

By sundown, Brad still hadn't showed up so Mary rode away. But next day she came back. She knocked, but got no answer. Entering, she found everything as she had left it. "Brad hasn't come home yet," she realized. Then, zestful mischief in her lovely blue eyes, she spread on the bare floor a pair of bright Zuni rugs that had been stored away at home. And, at the windows, she hung cheerful curtains she had sewn the night before.

Brad didn't arrive by dusk. Mary was worried as she left.

Her worry lingered, increased. It goaded her into riding over to Brad's place a couple days later.

Brad *still* hadn't returned home! . . .

As an excuse for visiting him, she had brought some jars of fruit she had canned, and a quilt of wildcat skins which was cluttering up her room at home but which would look so useful on Brad's bunk. Slowly she put the things in their proper places, a strange, ghastly feeling in her heart. On the table and mantel she arrayed bunches of flowers she had gathered—poppies and lupines and Mariposa lilies and gay *romero;* and it seemed to her as if she were putting in order the house of a man who was dead. . . .

"If he's not back tomorrow," she resolved, "I'll start a hunt for him."

But he was back, next day. As Mary rode up, she saw a band of thirty-odd wild horses milling in the corral. A great warmth of relief surged through her. Brad had been gone on a mustang hunt, that was all. She knocked on the door. Getting no answer, she entered.

Brad lay on the bunk, in a profound lethargy of sleep. Mary looked at his gaunt face and realized that he had worked himself nigh to collapse. A deep tenderness welled in her. She felt an overpowering desire to smooth his forehead. The thought made her blush, a hot tide of color crimsoning her face.

"I—I bet he was surprised to see the—improvements in his gloomy old 'dobe," she told herself, smiling.

She had brought some cake and a meat pie. She placed these on the table, and left. And as she rode home, her pulse beat at a swifter, brighter tempo, singing through her veins.

CHAPTER TWO

A Gold Concho—For Luck?

THE next morning at breakfast she was still feeling friendly. "Uncle Chuck," she suggested, "will you ride over and invite Brad Prentiss here for dinner, Sunday?"

"Dang it," Chuck grumbled, "I don't approve of havin' any truck with him! Kid, you're throwin' yourself at his head!"

"I'm just being neighborly," Mary protested.

"Neighborly, my eye!" old Chuck exploded, lunging out of his chair. "Dang it, why don't you take a license and a preacher and a shotgun over to that nester and *make* 'im marry you!"

Mary laughed, a tremulous catch in her throat. "I suspect I am a little foolish about Brad."

Chuck Barton nearly popped. He threw his blue-veined hands toward heaven. He tore his gray hair in dismay. "Mary, you're daft! You're throwin' yourself

away on a poverty-poor mustang hunter. You're loco, you're plumb—"

"No, Chuck," Mary said, her blue eyes shining. "I'm happy."

"But it's all wrong!" he spluttered. "First thing you know, you'll be askin' him to marry you. And if he turns you down, you'll—"

"Oh, Chuck," she begged, grasping his hand in hers, "do you think he would turn me down?"

Chuck's gray-whiskered face turned apoplectic. "Oh, hell!" he gasped. "I wash my hands of the whole business!"

Mary had some bread baking. She wrapped up some loaves that would do her proud; and rode over to Brad's spread herself.

She saw smoke curling from the chimney. Her heart leaped.

As she knocked on the door, shyness seized her. After all, Brad might not know what she looked like. He hadn't been able to see well, that day at the rodeo.

"Oh!" said Mary, as the door opened. "H-Hello!"

A girl came out, a young girl with sleek black hair and long-lashed dark eyes, a breathtakingly lovely girl in a smart red dress that fitted gracefully her shapely figure.

"I'm Mary Barton. Is—is Brad Prentiss home?"

The black-haired girl stared at Mary, her dark eyes full of hostility. Curtly she said, "Brad isn't home yet."

Mary stammered breathlessly. She reached to the porch post to steady herself, for her knees were suddenly weak and her mind was sick and giddy for she instinctively felt as if she had been caught in something shameful. She felt a nausea of anguish under her heart that left her limp and gasping. Courageously she fought down a wild impulse to turn and run. "I'm a—a neighbor," she said. "I came to invite Brad to Sunday dinner."

"Come inside," the girl said abruptly. "I've been wanting to have a talk with you. I'm Ella Watson, Brad's fiancée."

"You want to talk with me?" Mary echoed, amazed. "You're his—"

Accusingly Ella lashed at her, "You've been awfully friendly with Brad, haven't you?"

Startled, confused, Mary said, "Why, not especially—"

"Did you put those nice curtains on Brad's windows?"

"Yes. But I was just being neighborly."

"Brad has you to thank for that fur coverlet? And for the Indian rugs on the floor?"

"Yes," Mary said, a touch of pallor coming into the soft tan of her cheek. "This 'dobe was so dark—"

"So you thought you'd be *neighborly* and fix this place up for Brad!" Ella said, shrill with anger.

"I didn't know about you," Mary said.

"You did know!" Ella almost screamed. "You're lying! You did know! You want Brad! You and Brad have been carrying on, you're—"

"No!" Mary said so furiously that Ella subsided like a child scared out of a tantrum. "No!" Mary said, thoroughly aroused on Brad's behalf. In her was a resolute honesty that would not waver. Brad owned no guilt in this affair; and she did not intend for him to be blamed, no matter what humiliation it cost her to defend him. "Brad doesn't really know me! I'd seen him around town a few times. I spoke to him at the rodeo. But that's the only time he ever spoke to me, and he hasn't seen me since. He probably doesn't even remember me. I did try to brighten up this gloomy house for him, but I came here while Brad was out. He doesn't know *who* brought these things—"

"I don't believe you," Ella stormed. "Get out of here. Get out! Go prowl

around other women's men, you—you alley cat!"

Mary felt a wild desire to grab Ella and shake her, shake her, until she whimpered. And then, outside, a horse nickered. Hoofs thumped.

"That's Brad coming," Mary said huskily. "Watch the way he acts. You'll see that he and I are strangers!"

AS Brad's towering figure filled the doorway, Ella wiped the disfiguring anger from her pert face and put on charm as if it were a cloak and ran forward.

"Brad, darling!" she cried, a poignant catch of eagerness in her throaty voice. She kissed him, clung to him a moment with a show of possessiveness, for Mary's benefit. Then she turned with a pretense of rosy, bewitching confusion to present Mary.

"Brad, here's a neighbor to visit us! Mary Barton."

"Evenin', Miss Barton," he said, smiling—a smile surprisingly warm and infectious after his usual stern look. "'Fraid I been a bad neighbor. I should be introducin' you to Ella, instead of Ella introducin' my own neighbors to *me*."

"Brad," Ella put in, dimpling, her dark eyes asparkle, "I've got a big surprise for you! Mary and I are old friends. And I've been staying over at Mary's ranch for over a month! Just this last week I went back to Los Angeles, and wrote you from there that I was coming."

Brad looked thunderstruck. "Smokes, kid, why didn't you let me know that you were close by?"

"B-because," she said, as if fearful, looking up at him from under her dark lashes, "you'd told me stay in the city till you had your ranch earnin' a livin'. I wrote to Mary. She invited me out. I came, because I wanted to be close to you. I wanted to do things to make you comfortable. And I did. I used to come here during the day, while you were at work. I put these rugs on the floor, and I put curtains on the windows, and brought flowers, and cleaned and—"

"*You* did all that!" he gasped, amazement on his bronzed face.

"Uh-huh, and Mary helped me!" Ella said. "Didn't you, Mary?" She looked at Mary, her veiled glance hard.

Mary, anguish in her heart, said, "I g-guess I did."

Ella twisted a button on Brad's vest; and, pouting, in a little girl voice, she quavered, "Brad, honey, you—mad on me?"

"'Course not."

Mary started toward the door.

"Wait, Mary! Stay for dinner!" Ella urged.

"Do stay, Miss Barton," Brad said.

"I can't," Mary stammered. "Later, maybe. We—we could have a picnic—"

"Oh, that *would* be nice!" Ella said.

And Brad agreed. "It's a swell idea. Tomorrow night?"

Mary nodded, afraid to speak, afraid that her voice would betray her misery. Turning, she almost fled out the door.

Leaving Ella, Brad followed Mary out to her pony. "Wait, kid," he said. "Something I got to tell you."

He was so earnest, so urgent, that Mary paused. "Yes?"

"You know, something mighty fine happened to me lately. I'd been lonely here. I'd hated my gloomy 'dobe. I was fightin' blue devils all the time. I was nigh ready to quit. Then, I went on a mustang hunt. I came back here—and discovered that somebody had come in and brightened up my house till it shone like a gold eagle. Made it look like a real home. And comin' home one night, I found flowers set around. It sort of—warmed my heart. Another night, I found fresh bread and cake on my table. Lord, it got so I'd ramp home of an evenin' as fast as a hoss

headin' for the barn! And when I *didn't* find sign that my visitor had been here, I was staggerin' disappointed."

"Why," Mary asked tremulously, "are you telling *me* this?"

"Because those visits heartened me. I quit gloomin'. I got fired up with ambition. You see, Mary Barton, I owe you a heap of thanks."

"Not me! It's been Ella—"

"Hush. You don't have to back up Ella's story. Look." He held out his hand. On his palm lay a *concha,* a metal disc shaped like a rayed sun, of Navajo workmanship, generations old and darkened with a patina of years. "Mary, this *concha* is exactly like the others on your jacket. It's pure gold. A scarce article. I found it in my kitchen, just three days ago. Ella was in Los Angeles then; she wrote that day she was coming here. Mary, it was you, not Ella, who'd been visitin' my shack."

"Oh, I'm—*sorry!*" Mary said.

"Tell me, did you ever see Ella before today?"

Mary colored, started to answer; hesitated.

"You haven't," he said. He drew a deep breath. "I've known Ella for ten years. But I never suspected she'd lie so glib and straight-faced."

Impulsively Mary begged, "You mustn't hold it against her!"

"She's a stranger to you. And yet," he mused, "you didn't show up her lie. You stood up for her. You're fine and brave and generous, Mary Barton. You're as sweet as you are lovely. Pure gold." He smiled. "Mary, let me keep this *concha?* For luck? After all, we're old friends!"

Mary nodded, responding to that warm, infectious smile.

"Brad, you mean that you recognize me? Remember, that day at the rodeo, when you were hurt? I helped you to find your horse?" she asked eagerly.

Brad recoiled as if she had lashed him savagely with a quirt. Over his lean face came thunderstruck amaze; and disbelief; then abrupt conviction, and disillusion—stony, irrevocable disillusion. *"You!"* he burst out, grasping her shoulders in a grip that made her wince. "I've prayed that I'd run into you again!" he said, and his low voice was hoarse with anger. "I've wanted to see you just once, for about ten minutes. Just ten minutes. I've stored up things I want to say to you! I've laid awake nights rehearsin' a lip-larrupin' for you that'd warp a rifle barrel. Of all the—"

He shut up. Before Mary could pour out her dumbfounded questions, he thrust something into her hand. And turning abruptly, he left her without another word, stalked back into the house.

Dazedly Mary looked down at her hand. He had returned to her, so furiously, that gold *concha* which he had begged her to let him keep, "for luck." . . . Mary's eyes were tragic, as if the earth had twisted and disrupted under her feet, as if her universe had come crashing down. . . . *Why?* she wondered. First chance she got, she'd make Brad explain!

CHAPTER THREE

Picnic in Hell

NEXT day, Martin Cagle came to the ranch to see her. Mary asked Cagle to stay and go on the picnic with her that night. He agreed so eagerly that Mary was touched.

He was a slim, good-looking hombre, Cagle, suave and genial and very successful as cashier of the Monadnock bank. However, at thirty-five his brown hair was graying, and under his shrewd hazel eyes were crescents of dissipation. Mary liked him; but she sensed murky depths in him that repelled her.

"Mary," he asked, as they rode toward Brad's ranch that evening, "you changed your mind about me, yet? I warn you. I intend to keep askin' you to marry me every Sunday night until Leap Year. Then I'm goin' to camp right on your door step!"

"Nancy Hollis loves you, Martin. I wouldn't steal a man from any girl," Mary said quietly.

They reined up in front of Brad's house.

Inside, they could hear Ella scolding the Mexican housekeeper Brad had hired. Her voice was shrill with temper. But she looked cool and lovely when she and Brad came out.

Brad nodded briefly to Mary; and, as always, seeing him again made her heart leap. There was so much of virile strength in Brad, so much of quiet force in his lean, brooding face.

Brad introduced Martin Cagle to Ella.

"Brad," Cagle congratulated, "you've copped a prize!"

Admiringly he gazed at Ella. Instead of wearing split skirt and an ordinary gray shirt, as Mary wore, Ella had dressed for a picnic in a silk waist and riding breeches of yellow whipcord and glistening cordovan boots. Her black hair gleamed. Her soft lips were vividly red. Her long-lashed dark eyes shone in her heart-shaped face. In her walk, in her every gesture, was a silken grace and appeal. Under Cagle's admiration she fairly glowed.

"She's beautiful!" Mary thought.

They rode southward from Brad's spread in the twilight. Over the Morongo foothills, down into Bolson Grande; and from there into Maricopa Canyon.

Between sheer cliffs the trail took them alongside a tiny stream. Ella was in the lead as they came around a bend.

Abruptly she reined up. "Oh!" she said, amazed.

Of one accord they all halted, held in a spell by the unexpected beauty of the place. For here the canyon widened. Here the stream formed a broad, quiet pool that shimmered with moon fire. Around it palms grew in a dense circle. Towering native palms crested with green fans like war bonnets, they seemed, a council of Indian elders with their stately majesty reflected in the water. Behind them, the sandstone cliffs lifted toward the stars. Mary drew a deep breath. This place held for her the chaste grandeur of an old cathedral.

"Looks like a stage set!" Ella blurted. "If that pool ain't a phoney, let's have a swim."

"Any bathing suits?" Martin Cagle asked.

"I brought mine," Mary said. "In the cave yonder, behind the palm grove, we keep a couple suits. But neither is small enough—"

"Oh, I won't need one!" Ella put in impatiently. "It's nearly dark, and I'll stay under water."

Brad built a camp fire. Then he and Cagle strode off to the cave to put on the bathing suits.

Mary and Ella leisurely started to undress by the fire. . . .

Abruptly the quiet of the canyon was shattered.

Men yelled, behind the palms. There, at the back of the gorge, a gun roared. Then a burst of shots thundered out.

Mary jerked around, staring. "What is it?" Ella gasped.

They heard the thump of running feet. Then out of the palm grove a man came staggering. It was Martin Cagle. He pointed back toward the cave where he had gone with Brad.

"Brad!" he choked. "Brad is—" Words strangled in his throat. He fell flat onto his face.

Mary ran to him, lifted his head in her arms. "Martin!"

Upon his chest a great red splotch was

spreading. He did not speak, nor move. And Mary, a profound and rending pity in her heart, realized that he was dead.

BRAD and Cagle, walking through the palms toward the cave, had been unaware of any need for caution. Coming out of the grove, they saw a band of horses tethered to brush alongside the path. And ahead of them, before the cave, they saw a camp fire leaping ruddily into the dusk. Near the fire, half a dozen Mexicans assisted in holding down and branding a horse.

"Stop!" Brad whispered. "Cagle, they're *thieves!* Usin' a runnin' iron. Let's get back before—"

But already it was too late. Startled oaths burst from the Mexicans. One rapped a command. And instantly they lunged into a rush for Brad and Cagle, shooting as they came.

A bullet ripped through the neckerchief about Brad's throat and a slug slashed through his holster belt and creased his thigh. Cagle uttered a strangled scream, buckled at the knees and dropped. Brad's arm swept up from his holster, gun roaring. The foremost of the charging Mexicans pitched headlong to the dust.

Brad whirled to pick up Cagle. But Cagle had lurched erect.

"Go start the girls home!" Brad shouted. "I'll hold these varmints!"

Down the path Cagle lunged at a tottery run. And Brad faced those oncoming *bandidos* with his pistol kicking in his hand.

Shouts down-trail caught his ear. Darting a glance after Cagle, he saw five more Mexicans come bursting out of the brush beyond the tethered horses and take after Cagle, their guns blasting flame into the dusk. Shouting, Brad whirled to sprint to Cagle's help.

But those first Mexicans were almost onto Brad. A slug ripped like a saw along his ribs. His sombrero leaped from his head and his chaps twitched as lead seared through the batwings. Savagely he whipped lead into the faces of the men as they closed in on him like a pack of charging lobos. One tall hombre leaped like a hit buck and crashed face-down into the dust, and another *bandido* staggered and crumpled to his knees. Then a bolt of fire ripped open Brad's arm. His gun dropped from limp fingers. A triumphant whoop burst from his foes.

He bent, snatched the gun with his left hand—and then the Mexicans were on top of him.

A rifle butt knocked him to the ground. Dazedly he twisted over and blasted lead full into the face of a hombre bent over him with a poised knife. Kicking out, he caught a foe in the stomach and knocked him writhing. Then he lunged to his feet, swung, felt bone crush under the down-swooping barrel of his gun. For an instant the way was clear—and out of the melée he flung himself, pitched headlong into the darkness of the chaparral.

Circling through the brush, he headed toward the palm grove, intending to get to Mary and Ella.

He reached to his holster belt for cartridges to reload his sixgun. An oath of consternation wrenched from his lips. The belt had been bullet-ripped, and in the fracas it had been yanked off of him!

Behind him, men were crashing through the chaparral in pursuit. In front, between him and the girls, were the men chasing Cagle. "And I've got just one bullet in my gun!" he realized.

MARY, seeing that Cagle was beyond help, turned to Ella. "Quick! Mount your horse and start for home," Mary ordered. "I'm going to find Brad."

But Ella didn't move. She stood as if petrified, her dark eyes wide with terror, gazing past Mary.

Mary turned just as the five men chasing Cagle lunged out of the palm grove and rushed toward them. Whirling, Mary ran to her horse. Jumping into saddle, she savagely reined her bronc toward Ella, intending to snatch her up.

A rifle lashed fire. Mary's pinto toppled headlong to ground, catapulting Mary into a laurel clump.

Dazedly she scrambled erect. But before she could run, rough hands seized her arms.

Seeing that the men were Mexicans, she demanded imperiously in Spanish, "Let us go! You're bringing trouble on yourselves!"

Salazar warned curtly, "Be quiet, and you won't be hurt!"

They hustled her and Ella through the palm grove to the cave in the cliff. Here they were gagged, roped hand and foot, and left lying in the darkness.

Mary felt Ella quivering with sobs beside her. She tried to shift closer, to comfort Ella with her nearness. Meanwhile, in Mary's mind throbbed agonizing questions. Where was Brad? Was he hurt? Was he lying somewhere in the darkness? Who were these Mexicans? And why this sudden, unprovoked attack?

She could see beyond the cave mouth the stocky, swarthy men sprawled around the camp fire.

And then she heard a creaking of wheels. Into the circle of firelight came a mule team hauling a round-up wagon.

Mary's throat swelled to a jubilant cry —which did not pass the gag set firmly over her mouth.

For that was her Uncle Chuck's wagon!

"Uncle Chuck!" she tried to scream, vainly. "Chuck!"

And Chuck Barton, reining up, could not hear her.

To Salazar he drawled, "Here's your stuff, Colonel. The rifles are wrapped in blanket rolls. The ammunition is packed in sacks of oats. Looks innocent as a *marihuana* cigarette."

"Gracias, Señor," Salazar thanked him. "Your pay is satisfactory?"

Lanky old Chuck tugged at a hairy ear and grinned like a whiskered cherub. "Well, the beef bunch is forty head short. But I ain't kickin'. Because some of those critters I sold to that Gomez *hacendado* myself, only last spring! And danged if I won't sell 'em to him again when he buys stock, next spring."

"Buenos." Salazar nodded. "If my party is victorious, *amigo,* I promise—"

"Nix on the promises," old Chuck cut in, squirting a lusty crackle of tobacco juice into the fire. "Far as I'm concerned, you ain't no derned hero aburnin' to save the *peones* from the *ricos.* You're just a bandit and the money I make off'n you is dirty money—"

"Squeamish, Señor?"

"Nope," sighed old Chuck. "Dirty money clinks just as cheerful in my pocket as clean money—and a dang sight oftener!"

Mary, listening, was dumbfounded—thunderstruck. Old Chuck Barton wasn't satisfied with his pay as foreman of her ranch, and a bonus on profits. He'd turned gun runner and receiver of cattle stolen in Mexico!

Salazar's men quickly unloaded the wagon.

"Señor," Salazar said to old Chuck, "maybe you give me advice. I have take some prisoners."

"Th'hell you say!" Chuck swore in consternation, jerking bolt upright on the wagon seat. "Not *whites?"*

"Si. Gringos. They come into camp. See us. It is necessair' we capture them. You want see them, *amigo?"*

"No, cripes, no! I don't want to know nothin' about 'em!" old Chuck yelped. "I ain't even *heard* anything about 'em!"

"But, Señor, what I do with them?" Salazar asked.

"I don't care what you do with them!" Chuck whipped back. "Only don't, *don't*, let them get away to raise a howl!"

"I shoot them? Throw them into quicksand—"

"Anything! Anything!" Chuck retorted, lashing his mules into a start for home. "Just so you shut their mouths for keeps!"

SALAZAR rattled off orders. The outfit saddled up. Mary and Ella, still gagged, were placed on horseback. Then the party rode down Maricopa Canyon.

By midnight they trotted out of the sandstone gorge onto the broad floor of Trujillo Basin. Cautiously, with scouts on either flank, the Mexicans hazed their pack animals through the mesquite of a dense brasada. For an hour they weaved through a jungle of brush; and emerged, finally, into a clearing on the bank of the Colorado Maduro River.

Here were a two-room 'dobe, and a pole corral for the stock.

Looking around, Mary realized, with profound despair, just how perfect a hideout for *bandidos* this place was. The river separated it from Mexico and the hard-riding *Rurales*. And around it lay a thorny, trackless jungle of mesquite so vast that, within it, this hideout was as difficult to find as the proverbial needle in a haystack.

She and Ella were helped down from their horses. Their gags were removed, and they were carried, still hogtied, into the windowless back room of the crumbly old 'dobe and dropped roughly upon the floor. A lantern was lit.

In the front room were piled the blanket-wrapped guns and the oat-sacks of ammunition. A guard sat down on the doorstep. A fire was built in the middle of the clearing, and around it the men sprawled to smoke and talk.

"Salazar!" Mary called furiously. And when the squat bandit leader came inside, she warned, "Chuck Barton is my uncle. You send us home, or he'll make big trouble for you."

Salazar was staggered. "Your oncle!" he echoed, his smouldering dark eyes bulging. *"Valgame Dios!"* he swore.

"Chuck may buy stolen cattle," Mary said, "but he's loyal to his own. If he finds out about this, he'll come gunning for you. You let us go, *pronto!*"

Salazar frowned. The creases that curved from his thick lips deepened, and the vein on his swarthy brow stood livid.

"No!" he snapped. *"Nombre de Dios,* no! If I send you home," he said in Spanish, "Señor Barton will be ashamed that his niece has learned he is a buyer of stolen cattle. He will promise you to stop this crooked business with me. But I'm not ready to stop. I need more guns. No. Señor Barton shall never know that I captured you."

And he turned and strode out of the 'dobe.

Mary drooped, an awful coldness about her heart. For in Salazar's words lay a merciless and irrevocable doom.

Uncle Chuck had told Salazar to shut his prisoners' mouths for keeps. Salazar intended to do just that. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

A Bribe for a Mexican

BRAD PRENTISS circled the clearing in the mesquite as cautiously as a Mexican jaguar stalking an antelope. He was dog-tired. Following Salazar's party through the *brasada* had been an ordeal. Circling, now, until the 'dobe house was between him and the men sprawled around the camp fire, he stomached through the darkness to the rear of the hovel.

Peering inside through the network of cracks in the ancient 'dobe, he saw Mary and Ella lying bound on the floor.

Listening, he heard Ella demand querulously, "Why doesn't Brad *do* something to help us?"

"If—if he's not hurt, he's doing his best," Mary said.

"It was positively indecent of him to get me into a mess like this!" Ella stormed, an edge of hysteria to her words. "Say, I'm just realizing that this picnic, tonight, was *your* idea, Mary Barton! But for you, I might've persuaded Brad to take me to town tonight, instead of tomorrow. Just about now we'd be finishing a wedding dinner, and I'd be springing my big surprise on him."

Brad flushed. He felt ashamed for Ella. She wasn't fair, she wasn't being a sport. But, of course, she was upset.

"What surprise?" Mary asked her.

An undertone of hope, and dread, in her words, Ella said: "Brad's going to be rich! He owns land, near Taft, that he's decided is worthless and is going to let go for the taxes. Oil has been found next to it, and it's figured a big pool is right under his property!"

"Why hasn't Brad been told?" Mary asked sensibly.

"The wildcatters sealed up the test well and are buying all the land possible before telling anything. My cousin told me."

"But, for heaven's sake, why haven't *you* told Brad?"

"I wasn't going to tell him until he kept his promise to marry me," Ella said cynically. "When a man gets a bunch of money, right away he wants to become a good-time Charley and spend money on every girl who'll rub up to him."

"Not Brad," said Mary.

"You know a lot about Brad!" Ella snapped.

And Brad, listening, reflected that Mary probably *did* know him better than Ella.

Then Ella demanded of Mary, "How do I know that you and Brad have been strangers like you claim? How do I know that this kidnapping ain't a scheme to get me killed and out of your way?"

"Why, you're—" Mary gasped.

"You want Brad for yourself!" Ella accused.

"Ella!" Brad whispered. It was his impulse to rebuke her. But he checked his anger. "This is Brad. I'm goin' to try to get you out. Steady!"

He heard Ella gasp. While Mary, as if she had expected him, said, "I knew you'd come!"

"I'll try to cut your ropes," he whispered.

Tying his clasp knife onto a stick, he poked it through the crack in the ancient 'dobe. Carefully he sawed through the ropes binding Mary. She freed Ella, then slipped the knife back to him.

"Now," Brad whispered, "I'll try to chip a hole through this crumblin' 'dobe big enough for you to slip out."

Mary told Ella to remain lying on the floor with her, as if still tied. And to hide the sound Brad made as he chipped furiously at the rotten 'dobe, Mary began to sing. . . .

Meanwhile, Salazar paced to and fro by the fire, impatient. When a hail came from the river, he swore in relief.

"It's Miguel, with the boat," he rapped, in Spanish. "Come to the house, men. We'll load that boat *pronto!*"

They trooped toward the 'dobe. The guard, sitting on the doorstep, arose, and all stalked inside.

"Careful with the rifles," Salazar cautioned. "Every man pick up a load."

Mary's heart nearly stopped beating as the Mexicans came in. Ella blurted a frantic, despairing "Oh, my God!"

Salazar heard. He strode to the doorway into the back room, and glanced in. His dark eyes widened. *"Nombre de Dios!"* he swore, and lunged into the back room.

"Who untie you?" he demanded in

English. Stooping, he picked up portions of the cut rope. "Cut. Somebody give you knife? Where is knife? You tell!"

Mary sat up; she put her hand on Ella's shoulder, steadyingly, and told Salazar, "We've got nothing to tell you."

Furious, Salazar raised his arm and brought his quirt hissing down onto Mary's shoulders with a crack like a rifle shot.

Mary quivered, caught her breath with an agonized gasp.

"You talk!" Salazar raged. "You talk, or I cut you to pieces!"

Mary shook her head. Again Salazar lifted his arm and brought the lash down onto her hunched shoulders. The blow split her shirtwaist and laid a scarlet weal across her back. Mary covered her face with her hands; but no word, or outcry, escaped her. Savagely he quirted her, leaning his squat body into each blow as he brought that lash down with the vicious cruelty of a *vacquero* whip-breaking a mustang.

Ella stared, in horror, cringing to each blow.

And when, abruptly, Salazar took a stride and loomed over Ella, quirt upraised, Ella shrieked in terror.

"I'll tell!" she screamed. "I'll tell!"

Choking it out, she explained that Brad Prentiss had followed them here, and how he had lashed a knife to a stick, poked it through the cracked wall and cut their ropes.

And Brad, listening outside, swore to himself in utter dismay. Ella was city-bred, he realized, not hardened. He had to make allowances for her.

But in him burned an aching, tragic disillusion. . . .

SALAZAR ordered four men to search the clearing for Brad. "Find that *pelado!*" he commanded in Spanish. "You, Morelos! Tie up these señoritas, and stay here in this room to watch them. The rest of you hombres start loading the boat. I want the supplies across the river and hid in Lagunitas before morning. The boat'll have to make four-five trips, so hurry it up!"

Mary, for a while, was oblivious to everything about her, was aware of nothing but the burning anguish of her shoulders. Gradually the shock eased from her nerves. She thought of Brad. Fear for him flared like wildfire in her thoughts.

She twisted over onto her side and saw the guard, Morelos, sitting on his heels in the doorway. In the front room, Salazar was overseeing his remaining three men as they heaved packs of guns and ammunition onto their shoulders and carried them down the path toward the river.

Why, Mary wondered, hadn't they simply driven the pack horses across the river? Because of quicksand?

"Mary," Ella whispered tensely, "you got any money or jewelry on you?" Mary said yes, she had. Ella then spoke to the guard, Morelos. "You talk English?"

"*Si,*" he grunted. "I speak leetle."

"Help us escape," Ella said, "and we'll give you money and all our jewelry!"

His dark eyes narrowed. He stood up, came toward Ella.

"Hold on," Mary put in. "If you try to take anything away from us, we'll scream. Salazar will come running. We'll give *him* our *dinero,* and you'll get nothing."

Morelos stopped, his broad, swarthy face in a perplexed frown.

"Untie us!" Mary said then. "Bring horses to the back of this 'dobe. We'll give our bracelets, brooches, rings—"

"Yes—and fifty dollars in American money!" Ella added.

Morelos shook his head, regret in his avid dark eyes. "I can geev you one horse, *my* horse. I 'fraid take others."

"All right, *one* horse!" Ella snapped.

Without more ado, Morelos stalked into the front room. He climbed out of the window in the side wall, which was not in view of the men coming up the path from the river.

Minutes passed, taut with suspense. Then Morelos slid back into the house through the window. His swarthy face twitched with excitement.

"Horse is in manzanita, beside house," he said, slashing the ropes binding Mary and Ella. "Give me *dinero!* I run 'way."

"Wait!" Mary said. She darted into the other room and looked out the window for the horse. She saw it, then, looming in the darkness of the brush. She saw the bronc—and barely stifled a cry of furious chagrin that welled in her throat.

Morelos was a scheming fox. He had brought them a horse, all right. But he had also arranged not to get in wrong with Salazar. Morelos was playing both ends against the middle. For this horse was a huge, piebald gelding with flowing white mane and tail. It was Magpie, the outlaw bucker, that had tried so furiously to crush Brad in the rodeo. Stolen, evidently, by this outfit of *bandidos*. Why, she couldn't ride this brute to safety. Nor could Ella escape on him. Nobody could. Magpie was a killer.

Morelos would take his bribe and desert Salazar. And any prisoner who tried to escape on Magpie, would surely be thrown into the middle of this clearing, and Salazar would have no reason to shoot Morelos next time he saw him.

Thinking hard, Mary turned back into the rear room.

Ella was drawing a wad of bills from a purse pinned inside her pocket. She snapped at Mary, "Give him what jewelry you got, quick! And, say, two of us, riding double, couldn't out-run these bandits. So you go afoot. I'll ride and send you help."

Mary said softly, "I couldn't get away on foot. It'll take speed to dash past the men Salazar ordered to find Brad. If I should manage it, they'd catch me tomorrow. They track like bloodhounds."

"Then stay right here! I *said* I'd send you help."

Mary shrugged. She took a rare old Navajo bracelet from her arm; unpinned a brooch from her neckerchief; and took from her throat the gold chain on which dangled her mother's wedding ring. But not yet did she give these to Morelos.

"Hombre," she said pleasantly in Spanish, "you are a treacherous *pelado* who takes money to trick his *compadres*."

Suspiciously Ella asked, "What you telling him?"

"Just thanking him for the kind favor he's done us," Mary said. And she spoke on, in Spanish, "Morelos, you can have this money and jewelry, if you will do as I say. Refuse, and I will scream and betray you to Salazar. You hear? . . . Now grab this dark-haired girl, gag her, and tie her up. *Pronto!* Or shall I call Salazar?"

He flushed, glowered at her. But under Mary's stern gaze, his dark eyes wavered. He gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

Abruptly he jumped, sprang like a jaguar and clapped a hand over Ella's mouth before she could scream. Mary helped him tie her up and gag her. Ella's dark eyes were wild with fear.

"Trust me," Mary whispered to her. Then, taking care to give Morelos no chance to treat her as he had Ella, Mary ordered him: "Now empty one of those oat sacks. Put the girl inside the sack, and tie it up."

Ella tried desperately to struggle. But the Mexican pulled a sack over her.

"Now," Mary commanded him, "when the boat comes back for another load, you carry this sack down and put it aboard with the other—baggage!"

AGAIN that rowboat pushed its nose onto the bank. The oarsman stalked up the path to the men lounging around the fire. Salazar snapped orders. Jumping up, the *bandidos* trooped into the front room of the 'dobe.

Morelos leaned in the doorway to the back room, puffing on a corn-husk cigarette. Lazily he watched as each hombre heaved a pack of rifles or an oat-padded sack of ammunition onto his shoulders and stalked off in the darkness toward the boat. Last of all, Salazar picked up a load and started out. Pausing in the doorway, he looked back at Morelos, and frowned.

"Lend a hand, *cabron*!" he snapped in Spanish, and went on.

Morelos grinned. Turning, he lifted onto his shoulder the sack holding Ella. Then he trudged down the path toward the river.

Mary's chance had come. She darted out of the house, ran into the chaparral and circled through the brush toward the river.

She watched as, one by one, the *bandidos* reached the boat, dropped their load; and then turned back up the path toward the house, for another load. Last of all, she saw Morelos put down his burden among the others; then start back up the path.

Mary darted forward. Bent over the boat. Hastily she pulled other packs on top of the sack holding Ella, concealing it.

Then back toward the 'dobe Mary raced through the brush, almost sobbing as she ran, "I've *got* to do it!"

She reached the side of the big piebald horse hidden in the *manzanita*. She untied the reins from a branch.

Swiftly she climbed into saddle, and kicked Magpie in the ribs.

"All right, Magpie! Let's go!"

And the big, piebald killer . . . *broke in two*. Started bucking. Started pitching with insane, demoniac fury. There was no controlling him. Right out into the clearing, full into the glare of the fire, he plunged, hitting the ground with legs set stiff as iron posts.

Mary clung to saddle, praying, sobbing. "You *knew* what you'd be in for! Finish what you started—for Brad!"

The piebald rose like a rocket, went up sunfishing, his hind quarters snapping like a whip. Down he came, and racked through a reeling, spine-snapping series of jumps that carried him right onto the astounded Mexicans. They flung themselves headlong out of the way. Then they turned to watch—to whoop their enjoyment as the bronc cycloned through his hellish repertory.

In the midst of that whirling sickness Mary fought desperately to keep her head. For just a little longer! While, squealing his rage, the piebald arched like a cat. Varied fox trot with fence-rail and do-si-do and giddy spin. He went up and swapped ends in mid-air. Mary saw the moon swirl across the heavens—saw the camp fire like a blazing fence surrounding her. Saw the earth drop away and the stars swoop down as the piebald devil careened skyward. Up, *up*—to throw back on her! To fling himself backwards! To topple onto her and smash her into the earth! Up, on *up*—

Crack! A pistol roared out.

Magpie collapsed, a bullet in his twisted brain. Mary was catapulted from saddle and struck the ground with dazing force. Unconsciousness laid a mercy of oblivion upon her senses.

That shot had come from the corner of the 'dobe. Toward that corner the Mexicans raced.

Brad Prentiss stepped out into the firelight. Arms lifted in surrender, his face white with tension, he said, "I give up."

And meanwhile, Ella lay in the boat—in the rowboat loaded with guns and am-

munition, which Mary had shoved away from the bank.

The river current had caught the boat during those precious, necessary moments while Mary had held the attention of the Mexicans by her wild ride on Magpie. The current swept the boat into the night. Swept it down-stream, out of sight, out of hearing and swimming distance of Salazar's men. Swept it on, mile after mile . . . and at day-break, the eddies grounded the boat on shallows near Mexicali. There Border Patrol men found it, and found Ella, and lifted her out and took her to the safety of the federal immigration office . . . and listened with grave concern as she told her story. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Murder for Prisoners!

MARY had a strange and thrilling dream. It seemed that Brad held her in his arms. That he was on horseback and was carrying her home. It was all so vivid that it sent a tingling glow of warmth through her.

She opened her eyes, and she gasped. For she *was* in Brad's arms! They *were* riding through the night . . . but on either side of them rode one of Salazar's men. She looked up at Brad's face. On his gaunted features she read a profound and brooding sorrow.

"Brad, what's happened?"

He started as she spoke. She felt him wince away from her.

"Salazar is headed for his main hideout, at Lagunitas, across the Border," he said, and said it so curtly, with so much hostility, which he couldn't entirely mask, that Mary recoiled.

She couldn't understand his enmity toward her. He seemed to think that she was contemptible—vile, mean.

"Why is Salazar moving camp?" she asked unsteadily.

"Way I dope it out, Salazar is scared 'cause Ella and that guard, Morelos, had slipped out of camp. So he's headin' for home before a posse jumps 'im. We're hostages. If he's jumped on United States territory, he can threaten to kill us if he's not allowed to proceed."

"Which he'll do anyhow, once we're across the line," Mary added.

The moon set behind a desert range, and black darkness closed like a fist on the *brasada* as they rode along. Mary relaxed against Brad. His arms held her—but they were rigid, and somehow terribly impersonal. As if she were just anybody. As if he'd do as much for a dog! Tears of heartache, and bewilderment pressed against her eyelids. Passionately she demanded of herself, What's back of his coldness? Why does he hate me so? . . .

Vaquero Crossing was reached.

In single file the outfit lined into the wide river. Horses snorted and leaned against the current and lunged from the sucking grip of the bottom. To Mary, this crossing was symbolic. For Brad and herself, this river was the dread border between life and death, the barrier over which they would never again return.

Sunrise found the party riding down a narrow gorge. Sandstone walls rose sheer on either hand, topped by jagged rimrock.

A sudden yell, and rifle shot, halted the party.

Salazar shouted answer. And a half-dozen armed men popped out of hiding along the walls, and whooped a welcome.

As they rode on, Mary gazed ahead and saw that here the sheer cliffs spread apart to enclose a wide, green cove from every side but the north—and there the muddy flow of the Colorado Maduro, with its treacherous quicksands, formed a barrier. This was Lagunitas, Salazar's hidden stronghold.

"Looks like an army camp," Brad murmured.

In the midst of the cove stood three 'dobe buildings, and surrounding them were scores of *jacals* of poles and palm leaf thatch. Out of them, now, men came running.

Yelling, shooting off guns, they welcomed Salazar like a conquering hero. Squat men they were, Mary saw, with the alert, virile bearing of mountain Yaquis.

Salazar rode on into the tiny, triangular *plaza* at the center of camp, and halted in front of the largest of the three 'dobe structures standing at each corner. Mary realized that the 'dobes were the ruins of a centuries-old mission.

Salazar swelled with importance. His seamed, swarthy face glowing with triumph, he stood up in stirrups and told his outfit that now they had guns and ammunition and he would soon lead them into action. Finishing, he pointed to Brad and Mary.

"Lock the *gringos* up!" he ordered.

They were hustled into one of the tiny 'dobe houses, and the door padlocked behind them.

Ruefully Mary gazed about the dark interior. Through one tiny window, sun rays slanted like bars of gleaming dust. A bench stood against one wall. The floor was almost covered by a heap of green corn that stirred to the crawling of a throng of rats.

"Sit down, kid, and try to rest," Brad said huskily. She realized that sympathy warred in him against the enmity he felt toward her. She relaxed upon the bench.

Brad gazed out the window a while. Restlessly he began to pace the little room, thinking, thinking, in his desperation ready to grab at any straw of a plan that offered.

The morning wore along. Mary felt tired, shattered. Her long lashes drooped over her blue eyes. She tried to think, but it took an anguish of effort to focus her mind. Mid-day heat crept like a miasma into the 'dobe. It numbed despair. It wrapped a murk of suffering about her brain. All sense of time and place merged into a gray pall of stupor shot through with images that flitted and danced like mirage pictures . . . of Brad, of Brad groping blindly through an eternity of darkness . . . of Brad pressing a red-hot *concha* upon her bosom to mark her forever with a brand of shame. . . .

She roused from a doze with a start.

Brad sat on the floor opposite her, a tense, absorbed look on his haggard face. Idly he was shucking an ear of corn.

"Brad," Mary said, "if you're worrying about Ella—"

"Not worrying. Just thinkin'," he said. "Ten years I've known that girl. Lord, you'd think in that time you'd really know a person. I guess it ain't time that runs an assay test on humans. It's—what happens to you. You can learn more about a partner in an hour of trouble than in a year of easy goin'. I thought Ella was everything I liked and admired in a girl. I reckon I saw in her what I *wanted* to see in her—and nothing happened to prove different. I thought she had grit to shame a wolf. And loyalty. I figured she was the sort who'd stick by a man till the big Dealer calls in the chips." Savagely he stripped husks off that ear of corn. "I thought she was generous, I thought she was a square shooter. But there's no honesty in her! There's no fair play, no loyalty, no grit—rip all that off, and what have you got left?"

His gray eyes widened with a sort of horror. He was staring at the ear of corn in his hand, which was stripped of its protective covering of vidid green . . . staring at a hideous, moldy, worm-eaten core. Violently he flung it into a corner.

HE BEGAN pacing again, to and fro, in a torment of restlessness. Mary watched him, brooding.

"Brad," she asked softly, "why—why do you hate me?"

"Because—" He caught himself. "I don't hate you."

"Tell me why, Brad. You *must!*"

"I hate a thief!" he burst out.

Mary gasped, thunderstruck. "Brad, whatever do you mean?"

"Never mind. Sorry I said anything."

"Brad, tell me. You've *got* to tell me."

He stopped in front of her. "Listen," he said. "At the rodeo, on the 4th, I got jarred up bad. A girl helped me find my horse, 'count of my sight bein' blurry. That girl stole five hundred dollars I'd won as a prize."

Mary jumped up, grasped his arm, horrified. "No, Brad! No! I *swear* I didn't! The money did fall out of your pocket. But I put it back inside your purse and shoved your purse back into your pocket."

"Yeah? I've never found that money."

"Honest, Brad, I—"

The sharp *crack* of a rifle shot jagged across the hot, afternoon quiet. Wild yells of alarm shrilled from the gateway into Lagunitas. Pistol shots blasted out—and hoofbeats thundered in a wild rush toward camp.

"God'a'mighty!" Brad exclaimed. "Maybe it's—"

He sprang to the window. Mary darted to his side.

Toward the gorge that led into this cove they looked. They saw men on foot sprinting toward camp—and behind them, horsemen! Half a hundred riders wearing the sombreros and dark shirts and crossed bandoliers of the *Rurales!* On they came, at a breakneck gallop.

Like an avalanche, that charging line of horsemen rolled over the fleeing guards and rushed onto the camp, pistols blazing.

Salazar roared commands from the door of the big main house. Rifles were thrust from windows and loopholes. *Bandidos* dropped prone in the corrals and triggered their guns. And others crouched in the *jacals* and whipped bullets at the oncoming invaders. A hundred guns blasted into the faces of the mounted police as they pounded on into the *plaza* at the center of camp—and old Chuck Barton rode with the foremost!

"Mary Barton!" he was yelling. "Where you at, kid?"

BUT Mary did not hear, and he could not hear her cry to him; for the *Rurales* were charging into a murderous hail of bullets that took terrific toll. Uniformed men pitched headlong from saddle, were catapulted to earth as horses plunged in midstride and crashed into the dust. Rifle slugs blasted holes in the solid front of that attack.

But right on, to the main building, the federals galloped. Full into the windows and loopholes they whipped their lead—while six *Rurales* dismounted and flung themselves at the main door with a short, heavy log. The door splintered at the first shock. The men drew back to ram it a second time. Two of them crumpled in their tracks. A third staggered away, doubled over. The heavy log slipped from the hands of the three who were left.

They ran to their horses. Their captain, realizing they would all be massacred here, snapped an order and the *Rurales* charged right on through camp to the river edge.

Drawing down behind the bank, from its shelter they began coolly, efficiently, with sharpshooter skill, to snipe every *bandido* who offered a mark.

"It's a deadlock!" Brad burst out. "God, I've *got* to do something to bust it!"

The door of the main house opened. Half a dozen of Salazar's men rushed out. Toward the little 'dobe opposite Brad's and Mary's hovel they sprinted. Two of them fell, struck down by *Rurale* bullets. A third dropped before they could unlock

the door of the tiny 'dobe and rush inside.

Presently, out of the hut was shoved a man wearing the *Rurale* uniform. And as he came lurching out, those three *bandidos* stood in the doorway and shot him in the back. After him, two more of the bandits' prisoners were shoved reeling out of the 'dobe and murdered in the sight of their *compadres*.

Salazar appeared in the doorway of the main house. He pointed to Brad's and Mary's tiny jail, and roared a command.

And toward it those three executioners started on a run.

The *Rurales* yelled. Old Chuck Barton sprang up from cover.

"Come on!" he bawled at the law men. "Let's charge—"

Abruptly he clutched at his chest, and collapsed as a bullet hit him.

Mary screamed. Brad swung her away from the window, for those three running *bandidos* were almost at the door.

Even as they came sprinting up, one crumpled to the ground. A partner stopped, bent to snatch the padlock key from the fallen man's hand—and fell, himself struck down by *Rurale* bullets. The third hombre abruptly turned and fled back to the main house, bullets kicking up gouts of white dust around his feet. He got safely to the door: and there Salazar shot him through the heart.

"Cabron!" Salazar cursed him.

Brad pounded with his fists at the bars of the tiny window.

"God'a'mighty! I can't stand here doin' nothin'! Mary, you got any paper on you?"

"No, Brad, I haven't!"

He bent, snatched up an ear of corn from the floor. Touched a match to the shucks. But they were too green to flame up.

He searched frantically through his pockets. He took out his purse, but in it was only an identification card. He tried his tobacco pouch. Emptied the tobacco, ripped out the lining.

"Lord'a'mighty!" he blurted, thunderstruck. *"Look!"*

On the floor, where they had fallen from his tobacco pouch, lay five crumpled hundred-dollar bills.

"Mary, you d-didn't steal from me! You put the money into my empty tobacco pouch, thinkin' it was my purse! Not noticin', I filled the pouch with tobacco, and likely crammed the bills back under the ripped lining. Th-thank God!"

She was in his arms. He was holding her close. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Million-Dollar Rain

THROUGH the window, he saw two more *bandidos* rush from Salazar's "fort." The *Rurales'* carbines roared a volley. One bandit lurched drunkenly and fell to his hands and knees. But his partner sprinted on—and reached the door of Brad's and Mary's 'dobe. With sixgun bullets he set about blasting the padlock off. The roar of his .45 hammered into the room.

"Mary!" Brad said. "We've got just a minute. I've got to tell you—I love you, kid."

"You're kind, Brad. Th-thanks," she stammered.

"No, honey. I'm not bein' kind. I mean it with all my heart. Listen, Mary," he said, "back in the clearing in the *brasada*, I was hidin' on the roof of that shack you and Ella were in. I heard you order that guard, Morelos, to put Ella on the boat. I followed when you ran out of the 'dobe. I saw you push the boat out into the current and then go back to delay the greasers so that Ella could get away. Mary, honey—I could've swum out to that boat and escaped with Ella. But I didn't.

I *couldn't.* I came back to look after you. *You're* all that counts in this world for me—"

The door was flung open. Brad swept Mary behind him and sprang as that *bandido* lunged inside.

Brad's fist caught the Mexican in a terrific blow alongside the ear that knocked him sprawling. Cat-swift, he twisted onto his back and squeezed the trigger as Brad pounced for him like a cougar onto a buck. The .45 roared with dazing concussion in the room. But Brad had the greaser's gun arm bent back, and Brad's other hand was tight on the hombre's throat, throttling him.

Mary darted forward. She wrenched the pistol from the Mexican's grip. Brad jumped up; and as the Mexican lurched erect, Brad swung for his chin and dropped him senseless in a corner.

"Watch from the window!" Brad ordered Mary.

He snatched up an ear of corn. He wound each of his hundred-dollar bills into a snug twist. All five of them he tied onto the ear of corn with a strip torn from his bandana. Then he struck a match.

He set fire to the hundred-dollar bills.

He stepped into the open doorway. Salazar, in the main house across the tiny *plaza,* yelled, "Kill him!" And rifles whipped lead at Brad. Slugs thudded into the 'dobe; a bullet ripped through the neckerchief about his throat and another slashed his arm like a jagged knife.

But coolly, carefully, he tossed the ear of corn with the twists of burning paper onto the thatch roof of Salazar's "fort."

Then Brad sprang back inside. Out of the window he gazed, at the roof of the main building. Suspense twisted his nerves into screaming knots. "Burn!" he prayed. "Burn!"

A coil of blue smoke lifted lazily from the roof of the big 'dobe. A yellow flame danced up—and multiplied into a score, fifty, a hundred writhing serpents of fire. Once fairly caught, that tinder-dry thatch of palm fans blazed with explosive speed. From the *Rurales* crouched back of the river bank came whoops of triumph . . . and from the *bandidos* inside the big house, frantic yells and more frantic commands mingled in a panicky clamor.

Suddenly, out of the doomed fort, a score of men rushed in a sortie. They scattered, fleeing toward the *jacals*—drawing the fire of the *Rurales.* Whereupon Salazar sent more men tearing out of the big 'dobe, men carrying packages of ammunition. It was a desperate attempt to save his newly-acquired stores from the flames.

But *Rurale* bullets smashed into a couple of the boxes of cartridges. Impact of hot lead exploded cartridges, that set off other bullets, which ripped the boxes apart in a shrapnel-like burst of slugs that mowed down the running *bandidos* and touched off still other packages of ammunition in a hellish, murderous whirl of fireworks.

And then the blazing roof of Salazar's fort caved in. Sparks geysered up, timbers splintered, flames roared skyward as the roof crashed down on the men within. Boxes of ammunition shrapneled apart with a crackling roar.

Out of windows and doors the *bandidos* swarmed, throwing down their guns and stampeding in utter rout.

Up from the river bank, then, the *Rurales* charged in a thunderous gallop. Desperately Salazar tried to rally his men.

It was useless. Facing the *Rurales, Salazar* flung up his hands.

"We surrender!" he screamed in Spanish. "We give up! . . ."

OLD Chuck Barton lay on a blanket by the river bank. He looked up as Mary and Brad came to him; and though

the pallor of death was already upon him, he grinned like a whiskered cherub.

"You're wonderin' howcome I'm Johnny-on-the-spot," he said feebly. "Y'see, after—after deliverin' ammunition to Salazar in Maricopa Canyon, I started home; and passin' the swimmin' hole, I found Martin Cagle lyin' dead there. I re'lized, then, that Salazar's prisoners were *you* folks." He paused, gathering the last of his strength. "I know Salazar's hideouts. So I—crossed the Border. I went to the *Rurales'* camp; led them here. I'm almighty glad we got here in time. Now, I'm—dyin'."

"No! Uncle Chuck," Mary cried, dropping to her knees beside him, "we'll take you to—"

"*Shh,* honey. Don't carry on. Shucks, I'm feelin' kind of glad—'cause I've sorter of righted some of the wrong I've done. And I'm proud—yes siree—proud to be passin' out with my boots on! . . . Just one thing I regret. I'm dyin' like a miser. So help me! Dyin' with money in the bank, unspent." He chuckled. *"There's* a taste of hell for you!"

"Chuck," said Brad, "I'll get you a drink of water—"

"Whisky, lad! Ask Captain Garcia. . . . Whew, that's better. . . . Say, Mary." She had to lean close to hear his fading whisper. "'Member, what I tol' you? Get a license—get a shotgun and a preacher—and make 'im marry you!" And old Chuck Barton winked . . . at death.

MARY sat in her living room, moodily reading a magazine. A horse reined up outside. As Brad knocked, and called to her as he entered, gloom fled from her sweet face. More than a week had passed since her return; and in that time Brad had not come to see her.

But he stalked in, now, his gray eyes excited. "Great news, kid. A letter from Ella!"

"Oh!" Mary's throat constricted. "She's—coming back?"

"Listen," Brad said. And he read from the letter:

> . . . I'm back in Los Angeles, so don't worry about me.
>
> Say, Brad. I heard a rumor that wildcatters struck oil on your Taft land. I was all excited. But now I hear it's a false alarm. Newspapers say it's just a gas well. No oil. Too bad.
>
> Brad, visiting your ranch taught me something. I can't stand that sort of life. O, if there were comforts—if we could have a house in town and servants and could travel, I'd be able to bear the ranch. But living poverty-poor—no. So, let's call all bets off between us. I'm—well, sort of interested in a real estate man here—

Brad looked up, beaming. "Ain't this great news?" he demanded.

Mary's heart leaped. But still she couldn't be certain. "You mean, that now you *won't* make a million out of oil?"

"Who's talking about oil? Lord, honey, don't you see? Ella's broken off our engagement! I'm free!" He bent, picked her up out of her chair and enfolded her in his strong arms. He whispered, "Mary, I've got just a couple of minutes. I got to catch the evenin' train from Brawley to Los Angeles. Mary, I—I've told you already—you mean the world and all to me! Mary, will you take me, Brad, for better and I hope no worse—"

Mary pressed her lips to his in fervent answer. . . .

"But why are you rushing off to Los Angeles?" she asked, as he released her. "Whatever's the reason, I'm coming, too!"

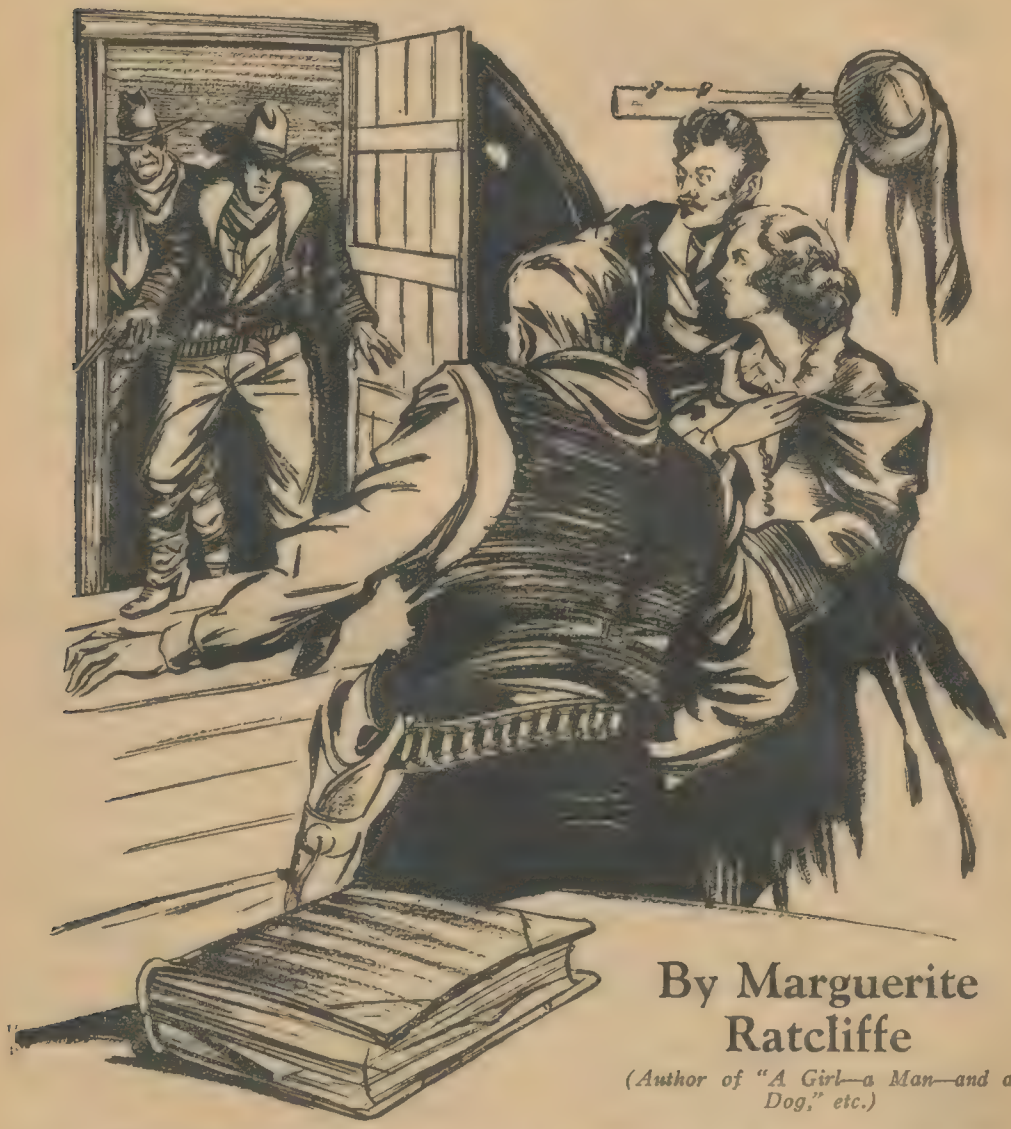
"Sure, honey. We got to talk to oil drillers."

"Oil? But, Brad—it was just gas they found—"

"Sure. But they didn't quit at the first hard luck. They bored deeper—and brought in a gusher that's rainin' millions!"

THE END

BANDIT'S BRIDE



By Marguerite Ratcliffe

(Author of "A Girl—a Man—and a Dog," etc.)

Those rising cattle prices meant that at last Nancy Baird could marry the young rancher she loved. But there came another man—one to whom she owed a debt far greater than love—and he was asking her to be his outlaw bride!

THE pot-bellied heater in the big livingroom of the Broken Circle ranch house glowed crimson. Flames leaped and crackled as Nancy Baird placed another log in the wide fireplace. She stood for a moment, hands clasped before her, blue eyes under gold-tipped lashes gazing dreamily into the fire, its light glinting in the light brown curls that framed her face.

The temperature was thirty below the last time she had looked at the ther-

mometer, yet Clay McAfee was riding the two wind-swept, snow-packed miles from his ranch to hers to tell her something, to ask her something. . . .

"Cattle prices hit four-year top. Last year's mark doubled." That prosaic item on the financial page of the newspaper had set Nancy's heart to racing, her eyes to shining, and had interfered drastically with the regularity of her breathing. To Nancy those cryptic words meant romance, love fulfilled. They meant the end of a four-year struggle of a hard-working young cowboy who had been too proud to ask a girl to marry him while the price of cattle continued its endless descent.

At the sound of stamping feet on the porch Nancy smoothed the blue wool dress that was the color of her eyes, pushed a recalcitrant curl into place and flung open the door.

"Come in." But at sight of her visitor the lilt in her voice flattened to disappointment. "Oh. Hello, Luis. I thought —that it, I didn't expect—Hang up your coat and thaw out. You must be frozen."

"It is very cold. But this—" his gesture indicated the comfortable room—"this is Heaven."

As he took off his fur cap, sheepskin coat and gloves, Nancy looked at him appraisingly. He was not tall, but his slim straightness gave him the appearance of height. His dark skin was too smooth for a man, his black lashes too long, his hands too delicate. But Luis Marino was the Don Juan of the High Country, and Nancy wondered, as she had so often before, what had brought him to this wintry land which he hated; and why she, unlike the other girls who fluttered about him, had felt toward him only a sort of sisterly protectiveness, and of course, a deep gratitude.

For, the year before, a few months after Luis had drifted into the High Country, he had saved her mother's life. Mrs. Baird, gathering wild huckleberries in the mountains, was caught in one of the sudden blizzards that sometimes sweep down from the Arapahoes in early fall. Luis was on his way down from the Gold Crown mine where he worked, and heard her frantic cries for help. He carried her two gruelling miles to the halfway cabin where the neighboring ranchers stopped overnight driving their cattle over the Divide to Denver. When Nancy and her father, desperate with fear, found them, Luis insisted he had done nothing unusual and made them promise not to tell of his part in the rescue.

Since then Luis Marino had been like a member of the Baird household, and Nancy laughed to herself at the envy in the other girls' eyes because she knew that it was her frail little mother whom Luis came to see.

All this flashed through her mind before Luis asked his polite, invariable questions.

"Your father, he is well?"

"Yes. He left for Denver this morning."

"And your mother?"

"She's in the kitchen setting bread to rise, and," Nancy grinned, forestalling his next polite and invariable question, "I'll excuse you if you just can't wait another minute to see her."

He made for the kitchen, looking slightly bewildered. Nancy shook her head and sighed. No use trying to kid Luis, he simply didn't get it. Clay would have had a ready reply to such badinage. . . She glanced at the clock, frowning. Of course, Luis was always welcome —she had told him that terrible day of the blizzard that she would do anything for him and she still meant it—but she did wish he had not chosen this particular night to come. Perhaps he would stay in the kitchen, at least until Clay had told her—had asked her—and she had an-

swered—The thought stopped the breath in her throat, made her lean weakly against the mantelpiece.

But Luis came back leading Mrs. Baird who protested futilely. He was cradling their battered old guitar in the crook of his elbow. Nancy's heart sank and she looked at her mother pleadingly. Mrs. Baird shook her head and said quickly, "Luis is going away. He's come to say good-bye."

"Oh, did the Gold Crown mine finally pay you?" Nancy asked.

Luis's eyes avoided hers and he answered bitterly, "No. They are paying their men now, but back wages they have not paid."

"But you'll be coming back, Luis." Nancy forced her voice to sound cordial. "Last time you left—when was it, six months ago?—you thought it was for good but you were only gone about a month."

The long lashes hid his eyes and he answered evasively, "Last time I thought it was for good—this time, I also think it; but I leave tomorrow for Canada on the early morning train."

Well, why be so emphatic about it, Nancy wondered wryly. His leaving tomorrow didn't help her a bit—now.

WITH one of his quick changes of mood Luis began to laugh and talk with a nervous gaiety. He pulled three chairs before the fire, seated Nancy and her mother with elaborate politeness and took his place between them. He leaned over the guitar caressingly and began to sing, his eyes half-closed.

Ay, ay, ay, ay!
Canta y no llores,
Porque cantando se alegran
Cielito lindo los corazones.

The cozy scene brought tears of irritation and disappointment to Nancy's blue eyes. This was just as she had imagined it, chairs close together, leaping flames before them, the steady heat of the stove at their backs; but only for two—herself and Clay.

Nancy's listening ears caught the crunch of hoofs on snow, the jingle of spurs and she was at the door when Clay McAfee took the steps in one bound, arms outstretched, voice eager.

"Nancy, darl—"

The sight of Luis stopped the words on his lips, Luis, liquid-black eyes fastened on Nancy, liquid voice crooning the English words,

Maiden divine,
Beautiful Heaven!
Your golden voice
Makes my heart rejoice,
And if I'm your choice,
That means Heaven.

Nancy saw the light die out of Clay's lean, wind-burned face, his gray eyes become steely, the muscles of his jaw tighten.

"Hello, Clay. Come on in," she said aloud, but inwardly she moaned, "Oh, Clay, darling—our wonderful evening spoiled. I'm so terribly sorry! I couldn't help it."

Clay took off his wraps, shook hands with Mrs. Baird, and said a brief "Howdy" to Luis who only nodded and continued to sing.

Nancy's bitter disappointment seethed into anger. "Luis," she longed to scream at him, "Are you just plain dumb or ornery? If you haven't sense enough to go you might at least quit singing that silly song." But Luis didn't go and he didn't stop singing.

Mrs. Baird turned to Clay asking the latest news of a recent murder. "Do you think Jim Tucker is guilty, Clay?"

"He's guilty as—he's plumb guilty, ma'am. But they'll never convict him.

His wife was the only witness an' a wife can't testify against her husband."

Nancy got up and walked restlessly to the window. Now her mother was making things worse, monopolizing Clay as if *he* were the unwelcome guest instead of Luis. She stole wistful glances at Clay. The nearness of him, the dearness of him made her heart beat suffocatingly. The steadiness of his gray eyes under level black brows. The dark lock of hair falling across his forehead that gave him such a boyish look and made her long to brush it back.

She couldn't let this go on, she must do something. "Oh, Clay," she broke in, "would you mind bringing in another log from the kitchen?"

She followed him out, hoping for at least a whispered word, the tender pressure of his hand. . . . But not by word or gesture did he appear even conscious of her presence. He piled his arms high with wood leaving no excuse for another trip to the kitchen and returned to polite conversation with her mother.

Nancy straightened her shoulders, tossed her head. He might have understood that she couldn't help this, that she was sick with disappointment; but no, he was ruining everything by getting jealous of Luis again. Jealous of Luis! Why, he was only a boy, younger than she, Nancy knew.

All right! If Clay was going to sulk she'd give him something to sulk about. She returned to the fire and smiled down into Luis's eyes.

"Oh, Luis, sing the one you said was written about me—you know: 'Eyes like the morning star, cheeks like a rose—' "

Delighted, Luis struck a resounding chord and swept into the melody. He sang meltingly, dramatically. Luis might not understand kidding, but at this game he was past master.

For an hour they laughed and sang and acted, while Nancy's voice grew more hysterical and Clay's silences grew grimmer. Abruptly, jerkily, he rose and left; and Nancy, bidding him a cool good-night, felt as if her heart were breaking into a thousand pieces. For a little while she continued the farce, then telling Luis good-bye and wishing him luck, she fled to her room.

There she flung herself on her bed and sobbed wildly. If she could only see Clay, beg his forgiveness. She couldn't do that now, but he was going to take her to the dance tomorrow night and on the way, close beside him in the sleigh, the laprobe tucked snugly about them, she would explain. Then he would ask her the question she was longing to hear, to answer. Her sobs gradually ceased. She slept.

THE early morning sun found Nancy on skiis well up the old trail that had once been the stagecoach road over the mountains to Denver. The trail was seldom used now, except by the ranchers on cattle drives, and by the Gold Crown mine in the mountains above.

Nancy was spotting trees which her father could use in building a new bunkhouse next spring. She would have lunch at the half-way cabin where Luis had taken her mother that memorable day—it was always kept well stocked—and be home in time to dress for the dance. Her .38 was slung in a holster about her waist in case she should get a shot at a coyote or jack rabbit.

The blue of the skies was reflected in her eyes. The light of the sun lingered in the curls that escaped her snug woolen cap. The dazzling beauty of snow-covered mountains, accentuated by the dark majesty of pines, became one with the song in her heart. She would see Clay tonight, tonight. When she explained, asked his forgiveness—oh, it would be heaven, close in his arms!

She gained the crest of the steep ridge that led to the cabin and paused, drinking in the beauty about her. She threw out her arms and drew a deep, ecstatic breath. Life was beautiful and wonderful and joyous! It stretched crystal clear before her, the rapture of Clay's love, the paradise they would make of the years together.

Sharply, in the still air, came the sound of a shot from below. Nancy looked down, became rigid. Black against the surrounding whiteness two tiny figures moved. One emerged from a clump of bushes and approached the other. They met where a small creek flowed into a larger one. Nancy whipped out her field glasses and focused them breathlessly.

The man who had been in hiding had a bandana tied over his face. The other man stood with arms upraised. A hold-up! But who would have money in this isolated spot? Of course! She had heard her father say a few days before that the Crown Hill mine had hired the telegraph lineman to bring up their pay roll.

Nancy watched tensely, breathing fast, thinking faster. She saw the hold-up take something from the other man—the money, doubtless—stuff it inside his coat and tie his victim to a tree. He turned and started up the small creek, picking his way carefully.

That was what Nancy had expected. The creek was a short cut to the half-way cabin. If the hold-up was clever he could follow the bed of the stream without leaving a trail. If he had skiis cached at the cabin he could follow the old trail across the divide and take the train from one of several small towns on the other side.

By following the ridge she was on, Nancy figured that with the added speed of her skiis she could intercept the hold-up at the cabin. Without hesitation, without thought of danger, she spun the cylinder of her .38 to make sure all chambers were full and started in pursuit.

The glare of sun on snow, her dashes and quick dips through the icy air brought tears to her eyes. The thin air made breathing difficult. Often fallen trees and underbrush impeded her progress. But she shook the tears from her lashes, got her second wind, skirted the obstacles and was soon in sight of the cabin.

At the edge of the clearing she stopped, focused her glasses. There they were—tracks leading up to the door. She might be too late, but she didn't think so. She shifted her ski pole to her left hand, rested her right hand on the butt of her .38 and swooped down on the cabin. With fast-beating heart, she kicked off her skiis, drew her revolver and entered.

"Reach for the sky!"

The man bending over the stove whirled toward her. The hand holding the revolver dropped limply to her side.

"Luis!"

Deadly threat, stunned surprise, pitiable supplication crossed Luis's face in rapid succession. He took a hestitating step toward her, held out his hands appealingly.

"Ah, *Santa Maria!* Nancy, you will not give me up? Say you will not, Nancy, *amiga mia!*"

Nancy stared at him, speechless with conflicting emotions. Amazement, anger that Luis had not pretended innocence so she might have accepted his pretence. Terrible uncertainty—what *should* she do? Half of her mind wrestled with her problem, the other half listened to Luis's incoherent story.

"Only that which was mine I took, Nancy. I swear it. The months I work at that mine and they pay me nothing. They say only, 'Wait,' and I cannot wait. It is a thing of life and death that at

once I get to—to Canada." His eyes which had been looking straight into hers shifted with the last words.

"Oh, Luis, Luis!" she groaned, "why did you do such a foolish, dangerous thing? Why didn't you sue the mine or borrow the money from Dad?"

"The courts—they are too slow and I could not embarrass your father, my good friend, by asking for more money than he could spare."

Instantly Nancy's indecision vanished. A certain admiration mingled with pity for the white-faced boy. He would rather take a chance like this than embarrass a friend—and he might have reminded her of the promise she had made him on this very spot, but he had not. The only thing she could do was to keep that promise, repay the debt she owed Luis Marino.

"Ah, Nancy, help me!" he was pleading. "Just one little white lie. That you came to the cabin and saw no one. It is established, my alibi. People saw me take the early train. Nobody saw me leave it. The tall hat, the bulky coat which I wore I have burned. On my skiis, which you so kindly taught me to use, I will be far away before they discover my tracks."

Nancy, thinking feverishly, trying to cover every possibility, scarcely heard him. "I'll help you, Luis. But tell me, quick. Did you tie the man tight so he can't get loose?"

"No, no. I did not wish him to freeze. I knew by the time he got loose I would be far away."

"Oh, Luis, you fool!" she moaned. "He's the telegraph lineman. He'll tap the line, notify the sheriff—they may be on your trail right now, while we wasted time—quick. Get on your skiis. Be ready to go. I'll be back."

With trembling fingers she fastened on her skiis, sped to the top of the ridge and focused her glasses on the creek bed below. No one in sight. Her breath of relief halted in the middle. The ridge—her own plain trail! She turned her glasses on it, gave a panicky gasp and stood frozen with fear.

THREE men, not a half hour behind them! Following her own trail that led straight to Luis. He could not escape now. They could follow his tracks from the cabin and they had probably notified every station agent to watch for him. If only she had kept out of this! How terrible if she, Nancy Baird, who was indebted to Luis for her mother's life, should be the one to send him to the penitentiary!

She *must* save him! But how? Suddenly, like a mortal blow came the memory of Clay's own words, "His wife was the only witness and a wife can't testify against her husband."

"No! No!" she cried aloud in agonized protest. For a moment she stood rigid, eyes closed, clenched fists pressed hard against her mouth. Then she straightened, took a long breath and with death in her heart sped back to the cabin.

"Luis," she panted, "come with me. Do just as I say. I'll explain when we have to stop and rest."

She plunged into the trail that led across the divide, Luis close at her heels. Over the top of the first long, uphill climb she stopped and faced him. Between gasping breaths she told him of the three men in pursuit and continued.

"Glacier—that's the nearest town—is the county seat. We'll beat them to it—we've got to—and we'll—" she paused, hands clenched until they ached, then forced herself to continue steadily, "we'll get married. I'm the only one who knows you are the hold-up and—a wife can't testify against her husband."

"But Nancy, that is too much to ask,

when it is Clay McAfee you love—"

"Don't argue!" Nancy commanded sharply—sharply to quell the wild rebellion, the flare of hope in her heart at his words. "Come on!"

They sped down a long open stretch, their momentum carrying them part way up the next hill. The keen air, the glory of sun and sky and mountains which had smiled on Nancy's enchantment only a few short hours before, now mocked the leaden weight which was her heart.

"I promised. I promised." The words beat in her brain. "Anything I could do for him—but not this! Oh, not this! Let him be a man. Let him refuse—"

But Luis, whose lashes were too long, whose skin was too smooth, whose hands were too delicate for a man, did not refuse.

At the next stop Nancy explained steadfastly. "It's the only way out, Luis; and—it's all my fault. If my trail hadn't led them straight to the cabin, if I hadn't detained you, you could probably have made it. And even if they'd caught you, they'd have a hard time proving you did it."

She paused, hoping, praying, willing him to refuse, but he only mumbled his thanks and his eyes avoided hers. With the death of her last flicker of hope Nancy felt as if she, too, died. Her voice sounded strange in her own ears.

"When they find us, Luis, we must laugh and act embarrassed—we've eloped. You took the train to fool people. We were going to spend our honeymoon in the halfway cabin. Don't forget—and play up. Now, hurry."

The rest of the trip was a nightmare to Nancy, the thought of Clay a torture she could not bear, yet could not banish. What insane folly had prompted her to flirt with Luis last night, to let Clay go without one word or glance to tell him she was sorry—that she loved him—

And now—he would believe, as she must make all the world believe, that she loved Luis. Not even her father and mother could know, her mother least of all, for she would feel that she was responsible for Nancy's tragedy.

And back of her mental agony, urging her on until her lung's seemed about to burst, was the desperate fear of capture.

At the top of the last hill above the snow-shrouded little town Nancy paused long enough to sweep the back trail with her glasses. No one in sight; but their pursuers might be in the timber just beyond, or breasting the nearest hill. If only they had stopped to search the cabin there might still be time. . . .

"There's—the court house—Luis," she panted. "Get a license as quick as you can. Meet me at the Justice of the Peace—there, where the sign is. Oh, hurry, hurry!"

Mercifully, for the moment, fear had crowded out the realization of the thing she was doing. But when she stood beside Luis in the stuffy little living room facing the benign smile of the Justice, the arch, knowing smile of his wife, Nancy was overwhelmed by such a desolation of despair that she had to grasp Luis' arm to keep from falling.

Automatically, not knowing what she was asked or what she answered, she went through the brief ceremony. The Justice's wife was patting her shoulder, the Justice was shaking Luis' hand when the door burst open and three men halted on the threshold.

Schooling her expression to shy embarrassment, Nancy turned—and looked straight into the unbelieving eyes of Clay McAfee!

THE gay, carefree words she had intended to say froze on Nancy's lips. Like a person helpless in a horrible dream she heard the Justice cry jovially:

"Well, gentlemen, you're just in time to congratulate the bride and groom. Meet Mr. and Mrs. Luis Marino."

Clay blenched as if the words were a bullet that had found his heart. A spasm of pain crossed his face, then it became a hard gray mask. The sheriff, whom Nancy had known all her life, stepped to Luis's side, his kindly blue eyes bewildered. He laid a heavy hand on Luis's shoulder.

"I'm plumb sorry, Nancy, but I'm afraid congratulations ain't in order until I've asked this young man a few questions. Yuh see, we trailed a hold-up from the other side of the divide—right lucky I was up at Clay's place when I got the message—an' that trail led right here."

The sheriff's words gave Nancy an opportunity to pull herself together, to steel herself for the part she must play.

"Oh, Sheriff, I'm afraid you picked up *our* trail somewhere." Could that gay, laughing voice be hers? Nancy wondered dully. "Did you come past the halfway cabin? You see, I met Luis there."

"Yes, we did. An' I been tryin' to figger all the way why a hold-up'd leave such a plain trail," the sheriff admitted ruefully.

"I am so very sorry, gentlemen," Luis said easily with his flashing smile, "that we pick the same day to elope that you pick to chase a robber."

"Well, I'm beggin' yore pardon, young fellow."

Nancy's heart gave a great leap of relief then stopped dead as Clay stepped forward and said grimly:

"An' I'm beggin' yore pardon, Sheriff, but just to clear everything up final—for Luis' own protection—hadn't the hombre that was robbed better look him over?"

"Yuh're right, Clay. Yuh're a duly appointed deputy. Go right ahead."

Clay turned to the third man. "This look like the hold-up, Young?"

Solemnly the lineman gazed at Luis who looked very small between the massive bulk of the justice and the lean length of the sheriff. At last he shook his head.

"Nope. Guess we been on a wild goose chase. The guy that held me up was taller—bigger every way."

"Reckon I'd better search him, too, Sheriff," Clay suggested.

"Good idea. Then we'll give him a clean bill of health."

The palms of Nancy's hands went cold and clammy as she stood with suspended breath while Clay searched Luis from fur cap to heavy boots. He straightened up and stepped back. The sheriff offered Luis his hand.

"Congratulations, son. Yuh've won the finest girl in the High Country. Good luck, Nancy, an' happy days. Reckon yuh're headin' for Denver on yore honeymoon."

"Thank you so much, sir," Luis answered readily, "We had planned to stay in that little cabin but now we are found out, we perhaps go to Denver."

Clay stepped to Nancy's side, hand outstretched. "I'm wishin' yuh all kinds of happiness, Nancy."

She had not looked at him since that first glance when he entered. Now, at sight of his gray eyes almost black with pain, the twisted smile, it took every ounce of will power she possessed not to fling herself into his arms and sob out the truth. But she only put a cold hand into his, equally cold, withdrew it quickly and said steadily:

"Thank you, Clay."

There was a stir of handshaking, congratulations, good-natured banter. Nancy drew the sheriff to one side.

"Please," she begged, "don't tell anyone about this, and make the others

promise not to. I don't want Dad and Mother to find out until I tell them myself."

The sheriff agreed. "Come on, you hombres," he called, "we got to get back over that mountain and pick up the *right* trail," and led the two men out.

Nancy looked at the clock. "If we're going to catch the train to Denver we'd better get to the station and get our tickets."

The little station was deserted. Luis seized Nancy's hands and kissed them. "Ah, Nancy, you are the wonderful one—an angel! You do this for me because of a promise you did not need to make. But Luis Marino, he will not forget."

He was white and trembling. Poor Luis, she thought with a fleeting pity, it had been a pretty tough time for him, too. She said kindly:

"That's all right Luis. I—I'm glad we put it over. But listen—I'm not going to Denver with you, of course—I'll take the midnight train home and telegraph Mother to have one of the boys meet me. I don't want her to worry about me."

"But Nancy, *mia,* you cannot do that!" Luis protested. "How can you explain—a marriage but no husband? You will be very much embarrassed."

Nancy gazed at him a moment in wonder then laughed hysterically. He meant it! She had just demolished her every hope of happiness. She had just dealt a death blow to Clay's love—the only thing that made life worth living. She had just branded herself, in his eyes, a cheap flirt, the betrayer of his trust. And Luis Marino could talk seriously about embarrassment!

She bit her lips hard to check the rising tide of hysteria. "Don't worry about that, Luis, I'll think up an explanation. I'm going to the hotel now. Good-bye and good luck." She shook his hand quickly and fled.

At the hotel she wired her mother, telling her only where she was and that she would be home on the midnight train. Then she climbed the steep hill back of the little town and sat huddled on a rock gazing with dry, unseeing eyes at the mountains as cold and bleak as her future.

The train to Denver, a black smudge against the surrounding whiteness, slid into the station, paused briefly and departed. The thin sunshine paled. Darkness crept down. The light of Glacier twinkled a friendly reminder that even though love was dead and life only dust and ashes, one must eat, must sleep. . . .

TELLING her parents—her father had returned—was easier than Nancy had feared—and harder. Her mother did not question Nancy's explanation that Luis had persuaded her to marry him before he left, but had decided at the last minute it would be wiser for him to go first and arrange for living quarters. Nor did she question Nancy's gay and dramatic story of Luis' near arrest.

But it was hard to meet her father's keen blue eyes without wavering. And her mother's excited interest in the elopement, her commiseration at Nancy's separation from her husband were almost more than she could endure.

The next morning while Nancy, conscious of her mother's solicitous eyes, tried to force down a tasteless breakfast, there was a knock on the kitchen door and Clay's foreman entered.

"I brought back that saddle an' bridle yore paw loaned Clay, Miss Nancy. Left 'em out in the barn."

"But doesn't Clay need them any—" Pride stopped the words. This was Clay's way of telling her that he was no longer even on neighborly borrowing terms with the Broken Circle; but the stab of pain that accompanied the thought

was swallowed up in the desolation the man's next words dealt.

"It's plumb curious, Miss Nancy," he said, shaking a puzzled head. "Clay rode in this mornin' offen that bandit chase, packed up his war bag an' left without sayin' where he was goin' or when he'd be back, if he's comin' back. Which it looks like maybe he ain't. Said if cattle prices went up to nine dollars to sell out the whole kit an' kaboodle. Said he'd write me instructions but didn't make no mention of when or where from."

Nancy was scarcely conscious of his leaving. Her mind, like a body beaten insensible by many blows, was dulled to this last disaster.

Slowly, woodenly she went to her room. How queer, she thought vaguely, I don't feel a thing. As if, inside, I were all hard—like ice.

But frozen feelings, Nancy discovered in the days that followed, like ice bound plants, come alive. It was torture to avoid the pathetically obvious opportunities her father made for her to confide in him. When her mother attributed her lack of appetite, the dark smudges under her eyes, to separation from Luis, Nancy wanted to stop her ears and scream out against her loving sympathy.

She simply couldn't stand it, she decided at last. She would say she was following Luis and go to Denver, somewhere, anywhere, to escape. Her mother was spending the day with a neighbor. Her father was over in the south meadow feeding cattle. She would leave them a note and be gone before they returned. She did not trust herself to face her father's searching gaze.

She was flinging clothes into a suitcase when running footsteps on the porch, the sound of a door flung open, arrested her. Her heart stood still. Clay's voice called urgently, "Nancy! Nancy!"

She flew into the living room and straight into Clay's outstretched arms. He held her close for a long moment, murmuring adoringly, "Oh, honey girl! Nancy, darlin'!" Then he held her away from him and shook her gently. "Yuh brave, wonderful, locoed little idiot! Why didn't yuh tell me, honey?"

"Tell you?" Nancy stammered, a pulse of fear beginning to beat under this new wild happiness.

"Yes. I know all about it, sweetheart." Clay gazed into her eyes with grave tenderness. "I followed Luis to Mexico—"

"Mexico! But he said Canada—"

"Yes, I know, but he was in Mexico when I caught up with him. An' that was plumb lucky because he was safe there an' wasn't afraid to talk. He told me all about savin' yore mother—said he didn't want you to tell because it might get in the papers and he couldn't risk that—an' about yore promise. He had to leave Mexico in the first place on account of political trouble. He went back that other time thinkin' it was safe an' got married."

"Married!" Nancy breathed, "then—Oh, Clay, I'm not married to him?"

"No more'n I am." Clay's arms tightened about her protectively then he continued: "The trouble started up again an' he had to come back here. When he got word that his wife would die if she didn't have an operation that cost a heap more than he had or could get, he just hooked the mine payroll. But he says he'll pay it back when he can and," Clay grinned, "the sonuva gun had it hid under false soles in his boots."

Then, sobering, Clay lifted Nancy's face to his and gazed worshipfully into the blue eyes bright with happy tears.

"I'm not half good enough for yuh, honey girl," he whispered huskily, "but I'll spend the rest of my life makin' yuh happy."

DAUGHTER OF FEUD

By Lloyd Eric Reeve

(Author of "Cupid—Man-Breaker," etc.)

The enemies of her father were Linda Marlin's enemies, too. But she hated only one of them—and loved the other with all her heart. Why, then, when she was forced to choose between them, did she pledge her hand to the one who had sworn to break her in spirit and body?

LINDA MARLIN, astride her quick-stepping palomino, was half way home from town when she met Nate Taintor. The big man, his blond mustache glinting in the sunlight, wheeled his roan squarely across the trail. Linda's cheeks flushed angrily as she was forced to rein up.

"I've been wanting a word with you," Taintor said pointedly.

Linda's chin lifted sharply, her eyes scornful. "There isn't anything *you* could possibly have to say to me, Nate Taintor."

"It was just about one year ago," Taintor replied slowly, "in case you've forgot. I made you a promise then, said

you'd come to me in the end. I want you to keep that in mind during the next couple weeks. Just keep it in mind."

He stared at her intently. Drawing a match from his vest pocket, he broke it suddenly between thumb and forefinger. Then he laughed shortly, spun his roan and loped rapidly away across the shimmering range.

Linda watched him go with puzzled, faintly troubled eyes, and then, shrugging her slim shoulders briefly, rode on homeward.

Early that evening, after doing the supper dishes, Linda came out of the kitchen into the big living room of the Bar 2 ranch house. Her father, old Dave Marlin, was hunched over a roll-top desk at the opposite side of the room, turning the pages of a dog-eared ledger. He was a big man with massive shoulders, shaggy gray hair and beard, bushy brows. As Linda sat down he closed the ledger and shifted around in his chair. He watched his daughter for a musing moment, her yellow hair agleam with lamplight, her sky-blue eyes, the slim curiously poised grace of her pliant body. Her mother all over again, he thought, and his weathered face was momentarily shadowed with the memory of a grave out yonder, under the ancient cottonwoods.

"Linda," he announced abruptly, "a funny thing happened today."

The girl looked up quickly. "Yes?"

"I was down to the south waterhole," Dave said, "an' danged if I didn't run smack into young Jeff Bishop. I started to ride on, like as if I didn't see him, when I'll be blamed if he didn't turn his horse right in front of me. I thought maybe he was going to make a fight, but instead he just sticks out his paw an' says 'Hello, Dave,' like as if him an' me were old friends!"

Linda's steady gaze was grave. "And what did you do, dad?"

"I asked him if he was drunk."

"And then?"

"Then," Dave chuckled, "he went sort of stiff and scowled. Said he only wanted to see if maybe we could bury the hatchet an' sort of get on friendly terms. I told him I was uncommon sorry but I couldn't oblige."

Linda smiled faintly. "And so?"

"So he wheeled around an' rode off without a word. There's a nigger in the woodpile somewhere, Linda. Jeff Bishop never made a play like that unless he had some uncommon good reason."

"Why do you hate him so?" Linda asked suddenly.

Dave looked surprised. "Why, he's old Tom Bishop's son."

"Of course;" Linda nodded, "but after all, his father has been dead three years now. You and his father were bitter enough enemies, and I guess his father cheated you out of a lot of range; but it hardly seems fair to blame a son for his father's faults."

"He's a chip off the old block," Dave said stubbornly. "He's just waiting his chance to catch me napping an' stick a knife in my back!"

Linda sighed. "It's all so silly and—and terrible! The Marlins and the Bishops and the Taintors fighting each other for years over a valley that's big enough to support them all in peace. It—it's like the stone ages."

Dave Marlin smiled moodily. "It's the way the world's made," he said decidedly. "If a man didn't have something to struggle against, he'd likely sit down an' fall asleep an' never wake up again. You're a woman, Linda, an' your heart's tender. That's like it should be, only don't let it be too tender."

Linda stood up and walked to the window. For a long moment, a slim silhouette, she stared across the vast moonlit range toward the faraway purple shadows

of ancient mountains. Her father, she thought, was like those gigantic mountains, grim, immovable, rooted irrevocably in the ancient past. She swung around sharply.

"Dad," she declared, "you have only one reason in the world for hating Jeff Bishop. It's a habit."

Her father's face was suddenly hard, bitter. "Habit or not," he muttered, "the day's coming when I'll pick him up in my hands and break him in half."

Linda looked at him for a silent space. Then she walked over and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "I'm sleepy," she said, crossing to the door of her bedroom. "See you in the morning."

Dave Marlin watched the door close after her. He was motionless for a brooding moment, then swung ponderously back to the ledger, opened it, stared blankly at the page, closed it again. He laid his two big hands on top of the ledger, and his fists tightened until the knuckles turned yellow-white beneath the ingrained tan.

"I can't keep it from her any longer," he said slowly. "She's got to know. In just a little while now—she's got to know."

LINDA stood in the middle of her bedroom in the dark for a long moment. She lifted both hands and pressed them against her warm breast, and was a little startled over the hard pounding of her heart. She felt a hot flush stealing up her throbbing throat, across her cheeks, and knew she should be warned, and that she should heed that warning, and that, irrevocably, she couldn't and wouldn't.

She crossed to the open window, stood irresolute an instant, listening. Then, with a quick intake of breath, almost desperately, she placed both hands on the window sill, and with a flash of slim legs vaulted through, landing lightly outside. Walking quickly away from the old adobe house, circling the shadowy corrals, she continued along the rim of a deep arroyo. Ten minutes later, still walking rapidly, she approached a dark clump of mesquite, saw a saddled horse dimly outlined, and as she drew closer, a man detaching himself from the chaparral and swiftly advancing to meet her.

In the bluish moonlight his range-clad body was tall and lean, shoulders of solid breadth tapering into flat thighs, his face rugged and weathered and young.

Neither spoke. Simply they went into each other's arms, melting together, for a long instant blending as one. She felt the quickening pressure of his arms, the leashed violence and abiding tenderness, the sudden insistence of his lips that seemed to tear her heart loose from its roots.

She drew back, disheveled, a little frightened, not so much at the impulsive ardor of the man as at her own wild surrender. At the same instant, the weathered image of her father was before her, the memory of his devotion and kindness; and sense of her disloyalty struck against her heart.

Jeff Bishop smiled crookedly. "Let's sit over here," he suggested, waving to a flat-topped rock. "We've got to talk it out."

They sat down on the rock, silent for a space. A warm breeze played against them, heavy with scent of sage and dry grass, the subtle aroma of distant pines. Jeff asked, "He tell you about our meeting?"

Linda mutely nodded.

"I did my best," Jeff said. "I swallowed my pride and just about begged him to bury the hatchet."

"I know," Linda sighed. "But it's useless, Jeff. He hated your father, right or wrong, and he hates you. It—it's like a sickness."

"That's always the way with hate," Jeff said. "Do you want me to go to him again, Linda, to tell him the truth about us?"

The slim girl shook her head. "It would only make things worse—if that's possible."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"I don't know, Jeff; but it's not right, meeting this way in secret. He—he loves me, Jeff."

"So do I, Linda."

"But, Jeff, we're young. He's old."

"Even the young have a right to be happy, Linda."

She flung out her hands in a helpless, bitter gesture. "I love him and I love you—and no matter to which of you I go, all the rest of my life will be unhappy remembering how I hurt the other."

Jeff Bishop lit a cigarette. He smoked slowly, stared across the illimitable range.

"I'll make all the arrangements," he said suddenly. "Three nights from now, that's Saturday, I'll meet you here and we'll ride to town and be married. Then we'll come back and tell him."

"No, Jeff. No!"

"We can't deny this," Jeff said. "Our cards are already dealt, and all we can do now is to play them. After we're once married, and he knows there's nothing he can do about it, he'll come around."

Linda shook her head swiftly. "No, Jeff. I can't hurt him like that. Why, he might never speak to me again!"

"Yes, he will," Jeff insisted. "It's our only chance. You want to do it, and if you don't, and we say goodbye, don't you see how you'll always hold it against him? You'll be bitter against him then, and you don't want that. But if we get married, and then tell him, he'll gradually come around."

She moved her head from side to side. "No, Jeff. I—I'm afraid—I—"

He reached out and took her shoulders, drawing her toward him. For a moment she resisted, and then relaxed against him with a sob. A long time she lay in his arms, feeling the strength and quiet purpose of him, wanting only to have him shoulder her worries and troubles, to hold her always this way, protecting, shielding. His head bent and their lips met. It was suddenly as though they ceased to be two separate beings, as though the warmth and strength of him flowed through her, becoming a tingling part of every fibre of her body. He said quietly:

"You understand now, don't you, child? Saturday night then. Meet me here and we'll ride to town, be married, then go straight back to him. We'll win him over, honey. We'll *have* to."

She said in a low voice. "No, Jeff."

He kissed her gently. "Yes, Linda."

"No."

"Yes, Linda."

Suddenly she was clinging to him, trembling violently. "Yes, Jeff. Yes, yes, *yes!*"

DAVE MARLIN rode to town early the following morning. All that day Linda brooded over the promise she had last night made Jeff Bishop, trying to believe that Jeff was right; that once they were married her father, out of his love for her, would accept the inevitable. She told herself that this was true, but in her heart she was far from convinced. Her heart was sick with worry and fear and longing.

Shortly before sunset her father returned. During supper he seemed withdrawn, troubled; and later, when Linda joined him beside his desk, he turned to her with an almost hunted look in his eyes.

"Something I got to tell you, Linda," he announced flatly. "Can't keep it from you any longer."

Her blue eyes were startled. "Why, dad! What's wrong?"

"I've run cattle here in Star Valley going on twenty year," said Dave Marlin. "Never in all those twenty years was there a year as bad as last, so little rain, so little feed, so blasted cold a winter. Today, girl, I was in town to see Travis."

"Travis?" Linda asked. "You mean the banker?"

Dave glumly nodded. "Last fall I borrowed from him. Had to buy feed to get through that blasted winter. I didn't tell you, haven't told you until now, figuring there was no sense in worrying you. I allowed I could sell enough beef this spring to clear up the note by fall. Then came that mid-winter blizzard and two-thirds of my herd drifted three hundred miles and then froze to death with their heads against a cliff. That's why I let all the hands but Shorty and Tim Ferris go, right after calf branding, to cut down expenses. But I couldn't cut 'em down enough. I owe three thousand dollars, due in two weeks, and I can't pay. Travis won't give me an extension. Unless I can raise three thousand dollars in two weeks, and I'm dang sure I can't, then this ranch is taken over lock, stock and barrel."

"Dad!" Linda stared blankly, then, as her father suddenly averted his eyes as though ashamed to meet hers, she was swept with a sudden wave of pity. She ran to him, kneeling beside him, her arms around him. "We'll get along, Dad—together. You and I. . . ."

The old man stroked her yellow hair absently. He spoke slowly, almost as though addressing an unseen presence. "It's our home, child. I brought your mother here when she was a pretty young girl like you, the same hair, the same blue eyes. We made this place with our hands. Out yonder are trees she planted, carried them water in a bucket every day so they'd grow. You—you was born here, child. Reckon we've got our roots here, and for me there won't ever be any place else." He stood up wearily and crossed to the window, stood looking out. "Yonder, there," he said, "under those cottonwoods she planted with her own hands, your mother is buried. It's her grave that they're taking, child. I have to go and she stays."

His head bent; he seemed suddenly to break before Linda's eyes. She ran to him again, pressing him close against her. "We can't leave, dad. We *won't*. We've got to get the money somewhere."

"Can't," he said in a dull tone. "Can't. I—I've tried everywhere."

She looked at him oddly for a long minute. "We can still try," she whispered. "For two weeks we can still try."

IT was late that night when Linda finally went to her bedroom. She undressed slowly in the sage-tanged dark. She crept into the cold bed and lay there bitterly thinking, unable to sleep. The face of her father was with her, the memory of his voice as he had spoken of her mother. And it came to her suddenly that she was faced with a strange and ominous decision, because deep in her heart she believed she could save this land which was like flesh and blood to the father she loved. But she knew, too, the price of that saving to her, the bitterness and heartbreak, the shame and humiliation. That it meant she must cut herself forever from Jeff Bishop, and that he would look on her with eyes of bewildered contempt. If only Jeff had the money her father needed, Linda knew it would be hers for the asking. But Jeff didn't have it; Jeff was almost as hard-pressed, this last year, as Dave Marlin. And so . . . .

To sacrifice all she held dear, pride and hope and her slender shining youth? Suddenly she buried her face in the pillow.

There in the dark room her slim body shook with a bitter and helpless sobbing. But minutes later she was still—as still as death. She was still with a cold and somehow calm terror.

Linda left the ranch at noon the following day, riding north across the sun-glinting range. The arid wind flowed against her, hotly spiced with sage; purple mountains rimmed the four horizons; the vast plain spread on every side, dotted with bunches of grazing cattle and horses, livened here and there by the flowing shadow of some soaring hawk. She crossed the dry bed of Apache River, and reined up two hours later in the dusty yard of Nate Taintor's Box Cross.

The ramshackle house appeared deserted, but as she started toward the sagging porch, a door swung open and Taintor himself lounged out. As she saw that tall, loose-jointed body, the blond hair and mustache, his high cheek-bones, thin lips and hawk nose, her heart stood still. She felt the sudden impact of his gaze, inwardly recoiled as he slackly smiled.

"Well," he asked, "is this one of them miracles I've heard about?"

Linda flushed slightly. "I want a talk with you, Nate Taintor."

Taintor drew a chair out from the porch wall. "Sit down," he suggested, and dragged up a second chair for himself. He watched her with faintly speculative eyes. "Well?"

"My father," Linda flatly stated, "owes money to John Travis. He can't pay. Travis is taking over the ranch. Unless Dad raises three thousand dollars within two weeks he loses everything he owns."

"Then," Taintor decided, "he loses everything. After last year, there isn't a man around here that can lend him half of that."

"Except you," Linda corrected.

Taintor nodded slowly. "Except me," he agreed. "I know how to make money, and I know how to keep it. Well—?"

"Will you lend dad the money he needs?" Linda asked bluntly.

Taintor studied the slim girl with insolent eyes; he smiled thinly. "Are you trying to strike up a bargain?"

After a silent moment Linda looked up. Her cheeks were flaming, her gaze desperate. "If it has to be. Yes."

"State your proposition."

"You know very well what I mean."

Taintor continued to smile. "If I recollect rightly," he mused, "it was just about eleven months ago I asked you to marry me. You said no, and when I tried to convince you with a kiss, you struck me across the face with a quirt. I'm the kind of man who remembers that sort of thing. I promised you then that you might yet come to me and ask me to marry you."

"It's nature, not you, that has brought this about," the girl quietly returned. "Drought and blizzard that made dad borrow more than he could pay."

Taintor shrugged. "Wait a minute," he said, and standing up abruptly, walked into the house. A minute later he returned, carrying a small slip of paper. He held it in front of Linda, remarking, "Look this over."

Linda stiffened with surprise. "Why!" she said. "That's dad's note! The one he owes Travis!"

"Owes me," Taintor corrected. "I bought it from Travis soon as I figured Dave Marlin wouldn't be able to pay up. I gave Travis twice what it was worth, with orders not to tell your father I was holding it. You see, my girl, nothing just happens. If you look deep enough you'll find everything has a reason."

Linda said: "Then you set out to deliberately ruin dad, just to hope you could bring me to you to—"

"To pay up for hitting me with a quirt," Taintor nodded. "If you hadn't come to me, I'd been around to see you

before the note fell due. If you wanted to change your mind and marry me, all right; if not I figured to knock the land right out from under your feet."

"You feel that way toward me," Linda whispered, "yet you still want to *marry* me?"

Nate Taintor regarded her steadily, smiling faintly. He took a match from his vest pocket, held it between his thumb and forefinger, broke it suddenly in half. He let the two pieces fall. "Yes," he said, "I still want to marry you."

Linda stared across the heat-hazed range for a full minute without speaking. She looked back, stark desperation in her eyes. "My father would have to believe that I was happy, that *you* were making me happy."

"With your help," Taintor nodded, "I'd make him believe that."

"And you'd destroy the note?"

"The day you marry me, you can tear it up yourself."

"What—what day do you want that to be?"

"You're doing the asking; like I said you would. Name your own day."

Linda said in a voice that was scarcely a whisper, "Then one week from today." She stood up quickly. "You can come over and—and see me whenever you wish now."

He reared to his feet lazily, smiling. "Want me to ride home with you?"

"I'd rather be alone this time. For one more time I'd rather be alone."

Taintor walked out to her horse with her. "There's one thing," he reminded, "that you seem to have forgotten."

She looked at him steadily, her oval face ashen. "All right," she said bitterly. "Go ahead."

He took her in his arms, his smile slack, pressed his lips against hers. She stifled the sudden outraged scream in her heart, waited impassive and limp until he had his fill. Then, not looking back, no longer seeming to feel or hear or even think, she rode slowly homeward.

THAT next evening, the night she had promised to marry Jeff Bishop, she met the young rancher at the appointed place on the rim of the arroyo. When he stepped forward to take her in his arms, she pressed him back with one hand against his chest.

His lean face was suddenly startled. "Linda! You haven't changed your mind?"

"My mind's been changed for me," Linda returned. She told him briefly and without emotion of her father's trouble, of his pressing need for money. "Nate Taintor," she finished, "bought the note from Travis. I went to see him, and he's agreed to destroy the note."

Jeff gazed at her. "Nate Taintor," he asked, "bought that note and then agreed to destroy it? Why, he's been out for years to win this whole valley for himself, to get both my ranch and your father's. You don't really believe he means that, Linda, that he really figures to let your father's ranch slip through his fingers after once getting hold of it?"

"I *know* he will," Linda quietly returned. "You see, Jeff, in just six days I am going to marry Nate Taintor."

"What!" Jeff Bishop straightened as though she had struck him in the face. "You're going to what?"

"Marry Nate Taintor," Linda quietly returned. "Oh, I know what you think. All right, think it! But you didn't see the look I saw in my father's eyes. You didn't see him stand at the window and look out at my mother's grave. You don't know of the nights when I had pneumonia three years ago, and he didn't even sleep for a week. You didn't see a strong man like dad stand in front of you and break all in

a minute and become old and helpless and afraid. You didn't—"

Jeff Bishop placed one hand on her trembling shoulder. "Hush, child, hush. Don't you see you can't do this? Sell yourself for three thousand dollars. To a man like Nate Taintor. Why, child, I once saw him kill a horse because it nipped him. Nothing he's ever touched, but he broke."

She spoke very quietly. "Jeff, I know how you feel. Likely you despise me, and I can't blame you. No one but myself can understand why I'm doing this. But it was my mother and father that gave me life; and all that I can return to them is this life that they gave me. Jeff, I've thought it all out and my mind's made up, and nothing on earth you do or say can change it now."

He stared at her for a long moment; he knew suddenly that there was no shaking her. He said:

"I won't talk about it any more, Linda. What I do now, I'll do on my own."

She caught his arm. "Jeff! What do you mean?"

He looked at her oddly. "Reckon I was just talking," he shrugged. "If your mind's made up, I guess I can't change it. I'll walk back a ways with you now; it's time you were getting home."

NATE TAINTOR and Dave Marlin had always regarded each other with a certain hostility, but between them had never existed the bitter and personal enmity that had flamed between Jeff Bishop's father and the old rancher. So when Taintor asked Dave and Linda to have supper with him two nights later, a preliminary on Taintor's part to easing into the announcement of his coming marriage with Linda, Dave, a little surprised, accepted the invitation. They had supper in the big kitchen of Taintor's barn-like house. Taintor's hands ate at a separate table, and afterwards all but two left the house. This swarthy pair, Taintor's constant shadows, slouched into an adjoining room.

Presently Taintor brought up the matter of Dave's note, telling him abruptly that he had purchased it from Travis. The old cattleman reared erect in his chair, his big fists clenching.

"Why, dang it!" he exploded, "you mean you—"

"Now, take it easy," Taintor soothed. "Let me explain a bit. I bought the note, figuring it was good business and a good chance to get a hold on your range. I admit that. It's a game we all play, yourself included, Dave; but since then I've changed my mind. Dave, I figure to tear that note up."

Dave Marlin blinked rather rapidly; then he shook his shaggy head. "There's a nigger in the woodpile," he decided.

Taintor smiled. "Not a nigger," he corrected, "but an uncommon pretty girl."

"Huh?" Dave asked. "A pretty girl?"

"Isn't Linda pretty?"

"Linda?" Dave echoed. "What's Linda got to do with it?"

Taintor stood up and put his arm around Linda's shoulders. "Linda and I," he said deliberately "figure to get married in a few days."

Dave Marlin swung to his feet. "What?" he asked.

Taintor scowled faintly. "Any objections to me as a son-in-law?"

Dave ignored the question, turned his startled gaze on Linda. "What's all this about, girl?"

"Just what Nate has told you," Linda answered. "We are going to be married."

"You *want* to marry Nate Taintor?"

Linda said in a low voice, "I want to marry Nate Taintor."

The old cattleman ran blunt fingers

through his tousled hair. "Why," he said. "I—I. . . ."

A knock sounded on the kitchen door. Taintor looked up sharply, scowling his irritation. "Now who in thunder?" he muttered, then walked over and swung open the door. Jeff Bishop strode into the room. Dave Marlin looked at him and his face purpled. He said nothing. Taintor said, his voice puzzled:

"Hello, Bishop. It's not often I get a visit from you."

"I hope this'll be the last," Jeff returned. He looked over at Dave Marlin. "Well, Dave, whether you like talking to me or not, you're going to tonight. I went first to your place to see you, but when I found out from Shorty that you and Linda were here, I decided to come on over. It works better for what I have to say, with Taintor around to hear it."

Taintor's eyes had narrowed slowly. "Say what's on your mind, Bishop," he ordered, "and then get out."

Jeff turned slightly so that his back was toward the wall, and let his right hand rest idly on his hip just above his gun. He said to Dave:

"Has Linda told you she aims to marry Taintor?"

"What business is it of yours," Dave blazed, "who Linda aims to marry?"

"Considerable," Jeff smiled, "seeing as how she's going to marry me."

"What!" Dave bellowed, "Listen, you—"

"Taintor made a deal with her," Jeff interrupted smoothly. "He offered to destroy that note, only if she'd marry him—and she agreed, Dave Marlin, for *your* sake. She agreed even though she hates the sight of Taintor, even knowing he wants to marry her to pay her back for hitting him with a quirt once when he insulted her. Your daughter, Marlin, is selling herself for three thousand dollars—for three thousand dollars for you."

Taintor's voice rose sharply. He called: "Jake! Landeau!" The door at the rear of the kitchen opened suddenly and the two riders who had gone into the adjoining room earlier in the evening rushed in. Taintor jabbed a finger at Jeff and said: "Throw him out! If he makes an argument, let him have it!"

"Wait now!" Dave suddenly interrupted. He glared at Linda. "Is there any truth in what he says?"

Jeff spoke quickly. "It's all right, Linda. I've got a letter of credit in my pocket for four thousand dollars. I'm taking up that note of your father's, paying it off, whether he wants it or not—and Taintor can't legally refuse. I'm tell-you the truth, girl, and now you can speak."

"Where did you get the money?" Linda swiftly demanded.

"I sold out my whole spread to Travis," said Jeff. "Sold it to him for a third what it's worth just to get the spot cash."

Linda caught her breath sharply. "You did that for us, Jeff?" She whirled quickly to her father, her eyes blazing. "It's true, dad, every word Jeff says!"

Taintor cursed suddenly. He sprang backward, gaunt face livid with temper, his gun whipping out of his holster. "All right!" he blasted. "Now both you and Marlin die, Bishop! And I'm taking that girl, along with this whole valley!"

Jeff had spun swiftly sideways, not answering, his six-shooter ripping from holster. Taintor's weapon crashed through the room, and Jeff staggered rearward, went down even as he fired. Old Dave grabbed a chair, whirling it over his head and flinging it at Taintor. As Taintor dodged, the chair shattering against the wall, the two gunmen went into action, their weapons thundering through the smoke-filled room. Jeff reared up on one

elbow, firing coolly, blood streaming across his face. One of the gunmen plunged forward on his face, and Linda, springing sideways, knocked up the arm of the second just as he fired at her father. A bullet from Jeff's Colt dropped him then; and Jeff swung his gun at the forward-plunging shape of Taintor, aiming with blurring vision. Taintor broke in mid-air, collapsing to his knees, mortally wounded. Yet even as Taintor's head plunged forward he aimed one last vindictive shot at Jeff Bishop, and Linda saw Jeff's already wounded body twitch violently sideways. She ran to him, dropping to her knees beside him.

"Jeff, Jeff—oh. . . ."

His eyes opened, a small smile ran across his lips. "It's all right, honey. I made a will. It's in—your—name. You see—once I saw him—beat a horse—to death. . . ." Jeff's head sagged back and his eyes closed.

THE doctor said Jeff hadn't a chance. Jeff didn't hear the doctor and he didn't see the doctor. All Jeff saw was the lovely oval face of a girl floating before him; all he heard was her voice, calling him back across the space of endless night, pleading with him to stay. So Jeff stayed. On the sixth week, almost to the disappointment of the bewildered doctor, he left his bed.

It was a week later that old Dave Marlin came into the kitchen and found his daughter, her eyes shining with happiness, completely surrounded by this tall young cowboy.

"Bah!" Dave snorted. "Cooin' and billin' all the time! It makes a man plumb sick to the stomach." Then he walked over to the window, and for a long time stood there looking out at the grave of the woman who had bore his daughter. He turned back to the two younger people, and his old eyes were curiously misty.

"Well, Jeff," he announced gruffly, "seeing as how you ain't got any ranch of your own any more, I thought you might take over this one of mine. I'm like to have some grandsons to feed before long, and I need to keep the place up. Too much of a job for an old crowbait like me."

"You're not old," Jeff grinned. "You got just as much buck left in you as the day you was born."

"Nope," Dave denied. "I just ain't got anything to goad me on any more." He shook his head glumly. "You see Jeff, there ain't nobody left I can hate."

COMING!

Short Stories of Love and Romance in the Glamorous West

by

Robert E. Mahaffay ---- Lloyd Eric Reeve

Art Lawson ---- Vic Elder

In the September Issue ***Out July 19th!***

FRONTIER FROLICS

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

IT WAS a big day in the little cowtown or on some centrally located ranch—the culmination of weeks of eager anticipation—a Cowboy Tournament. All cares infesting the workaday world were forgotten. To old and young alike, the air was a-tingle with excitement. For the oldsters there was the happiness of re-created memories. And for the young it was one of those rare Frontier Country opportunities for the meeting of youth with youth—an occasion when love would bud for some and come into full bloom for others. The sixty minutes of each hour would bulge with thrills—Joy indeed was King.

Blue-eyed Tom from over the ridge, who had few chances to make the long trip to see his sweetheart, would be there to compete in steer roping and other feats displaying cowboy skill. Perhaps several girlish hearts beat high with the expectation of Tom's coming. Mary might blushingly know herself to be his choice, but Rose and Marcia and Bessie, unaware of Tom's secret declaration, might also be planning and hoping—and prettying themselves before their mirrors.

Shy Lucy would be tremulous with the knowledge that dashing, black-eyed Jim would come, eager for the answer she had agreed to give him that day. While pretty Belle would believe that surely bashful Ray—who was such a marvelous roper—would be so emboldened by success, that he would have more courage at the dance that night. There were other hopes. Perhaps Dick or Harry would get a horse and buggy at the livery and there would be time for a drive—even if it meant being late at the dance—a drive at sunset with the sky a pageant of glory, fitting back-ground for the glory growing in fast-beating hearts as a cowboy and a maid who had but infrequent meetings stole an hour alone together.

It was "dress-up" time. Curls were brushed and arranged to frame the young faces, glossy braids were wound about dainty heads or swung gracefully across shoulders with all the coquettish skill of their owners. Gaily colored or white dresses trimmed with frills of foamy lace or crisp ruffles, were confined to lissome waists by bright ribbon sashes. As naturally as flowers turn to the sun, these maidens of the Frontier West adorned their charms to meet the admiring gaze of men whose company was so rare, but about whom was spun the diaphanous fabric of their girl dreams.

The tournament was the root of the tree whose main branch finally developed into the semi-professional show popularly known as *rodeo*. But the tournament was purely a neighborhood "get-together" without entrance fees and without the reward of prize money. In fact, the only financial turn-over was usually that hazarded on bets, the partisans of this or that roper putting up a

wager on his skill, or the bet staked on the ability of some rider of local reputation to stay with a tough bucking horse.

All events displayed horsemanship and skill at roping, two accomplishments upon which the livelihood of the participants depended. Only grown steers, often five or six-year-olds, were roped. As they were unaccustomed to seeing people afoot, the proximity of the crowd stirred them dangerously and if a cowboy missed his throw, the animal was likely to stampede among the onlookers, when it became an urgent necessity for someone to rope the charging beast with great speed.

A popular trick of horsemanship consisted of laying a row of white handkerchiefs or other small objects at regular intervals along the ground, and the cowboy would lean from his saddle to gather them up while riding at top speed.

But the most fascinating exhibition of speed and dexterity was displayed in an event suggestive of the old jousting tourney. Set in the ground along the riding course—some fifty feet apart—were horizontal posts with arms extending out from them about either or nine feet above the ground. From the end of these arms were suspended wires on the slightly hooked ends of which hung metal rings about two inches in diameter. Racing past the posts, the cowboy endeavored to thrust the end of the long lance he carried, through these rings. This required exceptionally fine balance and particular art. It appeared easy. Actually it was the most difficult of feats and the contestant needed all his nerve plus the three tries allowed. Great applause was accorded the one accumulating most rings—the lucky winner.

There was the inevitable horserace for which the crowd often had to move some distance to a straight stretch long enough for the course.

But the climax of the occasion was the dance in the evening.

This was the culmination of pleasure for the girls who had interestedly watched their heroes competing for honors, but who now might have the more personal companionship for which their isolated lives made them so eager. If the hero had suffered some unfortunate accident—and it had to be pretty serious to prevent his appearing on the dance floor—the particular girl for whom he cared was given enviable opportunities to display her solicitude—and love.

As these tournaments usually occurred in the fall, discussion of them enlivened many a long winter hour when the events were talked over and re-lived, and wagers laid on the next tournament, which might be nearly a twelvemonth away.

Thus the Tournament, like others of the few recreations of the Frontier, fulfilled a two-fold purpose—the getting together of human beings of widely separated lives, and the supplying of that amusement for which there was so urgent a need. Last, but certainly not least, they were brilliantly laced with the golden threads of romance. What stimulates deeper interest in the hero of a girl's heart than to see him participate in some competition requiring strength and skill? And what is more inspiring to the interest of that same hero than to feel the admiring gaze of the girl whose eyes are telling him she knows *he* is going to win?

FROM A KENNEBEC BUNKHOUSE TO THE DEVIL'S GRAVEYARD

Runs the Trail of Glamour and Danger. Two Long Novelettes—

SPY CARGO by Ared White. The unsung heroes who fight the secret wars.

— And —

THE DARK GODS CALL by Robert Carse. An amazing escape from Devil's Island.

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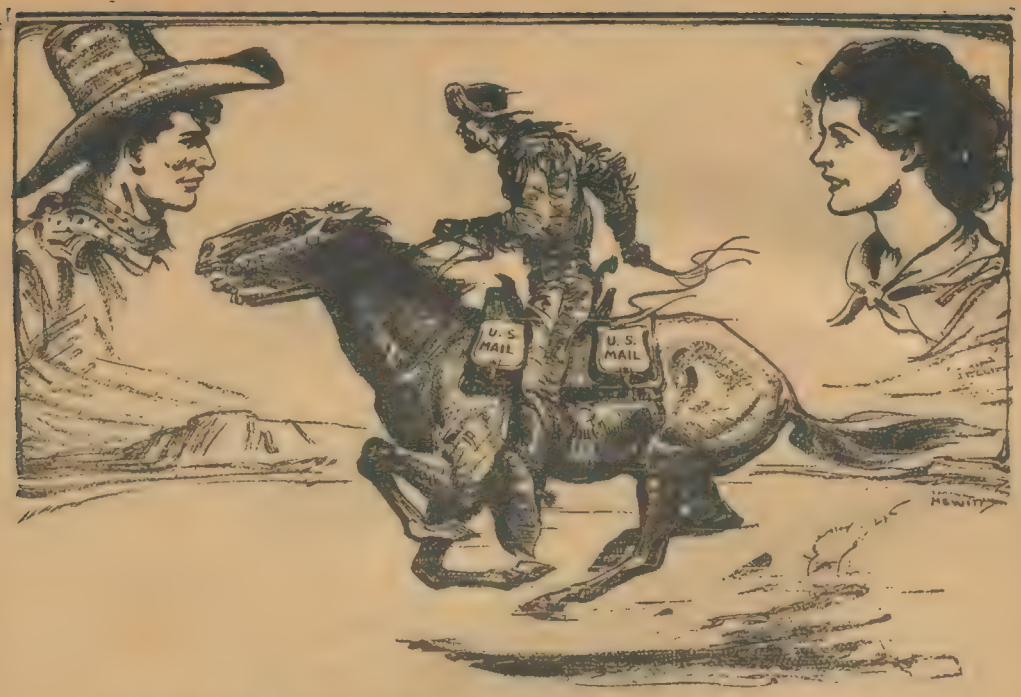

THE PONY EXPRESS

THE FAST little horse that covers the last lap on the Pony Express route from the readers to Rangeland Romances' office brought in two good full bags of mail this month. He picked up letters from all over. But our pony is a husky little horse; he has two more bags that are crying out for mail. And his rider is glad to stop off anywhere to pick up a letter—or to deliver one. So if you want a pen pal send your plea by Pony Express. Or if you want to swap some opinions about your magazine or what you're doing, or just about life, itself, there's always a place here for you.

The first letter this month is from a Michigan lass who, alas, made a wish that can't come true. She didn't miss by much. If her letter had come in just a day or two earlier she would have made the first trip on the *Pony Express*. But the second trip is just as good as the first. Maybe better. And the third and fourth should be even better yet. Here's Echo's letter:

Dear Editor:

Happened to pick up your swell magazine and decided to try for the first trip of the *Pony Express* rider.

I'm just sixteen, dark hair, eyes and complexion. My favorite sport is skating. My hobby is collecting cowboy songs. Won't somebody who likes the old West as much as I please write me? I guarantee answers to everyone.

Sincerely yours,
Echo.
Miss Helen Cutler,
Clawson, Michigan.

Thanks for the compliment on our "swell magazine," Echo. We're going to make it better, if we can. But we'll need your help, and the help of all our readers. We are always anxious to know just what you like best about it so we can get more of the same kind. And if there's something that doesn't come right up to scratch we want to know about that, too.

The second letter this month is from a man. He also has a bouquet for *Rangeland Romances,* and a toast. But listen to him:

Dear Editor:

I just read the first issue of *Rangeland Romances* and want to say it's a good magazine.

Now I want to be one of the first to get my letter off on the *Pony Express*. I am a young man twenty-eight years old. Five

feet ten inches tall, weigh a hundred-ninety pounds. My eyes are blue and my head is bald, very much so, with a ring of brown hair around the edge.

My work is upholstering furniture in a factory so I am kept indoors all the time and would like to hear from the outdoor world. I want to hear from everyone. But girls about my own age are given special invitation to write.

My nature is rather of the shy, lone wolf kind. I don't mix with crowds much but would rather have a couple of true pals and be by ourselves. I especially like autoing and hiking in the woods. In my idle moments I try to write song-poems and hope I may get some published soon.

Hoping you'll print this real soon and that all the girls, and fellows too, will write to me. I will exchange snaps with anyone who will send me one first. And I'll answer all letters coming my way. I know what it's like to write and then not receive answers. I've done it with other magazines.

Here's to a long and prosperous life for *Rangeland Romances.*

Sincerely yours,
Jim.
James O. Johnson,
369 Northeast St.,
Mooresville, Indiana.

The following letter is from a girl who has a real suggestion to make. We like letters of this sort. And are always looking for more of them.

Dear Editor:

The June issue of *Rangeland Romances* is about the best thing I've ever read. Those stories all seem to be about real people. And one of them I liked most of all. It's by Cliff Farrell and is called "Girl in the Saddle." I don't know but that I'd have done just the same thing as Joyce Tanner did if I was in the same spot. I didn't like the way she acted toward the end, or how she gave up that time when she thought her lover was dead. But she was acting human, just the same, and that made her a lot more real to me than if she had done just the "right" thing. Are we going to have more stories like that where the heroine and hero do what real people and not "story-book" characters do? If so I'm a reader for keeps.

I'd like to know some real cowboys if there are any left. I'm a brunette, with black eyes and hair. There is some French blood in me but most of it is good old American. The girls up here say I'm good-looking. But I don't know even though I sometimes think they're right. I weigh about one-hundred and twenty pounds and am five feet four inches high. Isn't that a good size for a would-be cowgirl?

Yours,
Genie.
Eugenie Lachaise,
Fall River, Mass.

Thanks for the comments of Cliff Farrell's stories. He is a real westerner and lives out there now. If you liked "Girl in the Saddle," you probably liked his "Honkatonk Girl" last month and "Champion of Wanted Men" in this issue. Cliff Farrell is one of our regular authors.

Everybody seems to like *Rangeland Romances,* and that is certainly giving the editors a real job to shoot at if the magazine's original popularity is going to keep up. Listen to this:

Dear Editor:

Here I am in the hospital flat on my back from getting kicked by an automobile. It's worser than getting run over by a horse. But I guess it's all my own fault. I was tinkering around with the insides of the old "Flivver" a spell back when a hunk came out of one of the pistons and cracked me on the top of the head. It took a pretty big piece out of my skull and now neither me or "Liz" is working right. But pretty soon I guess I'll be on my feet again and will get that piece of junk working proper.

Or maybe I'll swap it in for a horse. That's what I'm writing about. A pal of mine came in with a *Rangeland Romances* the other day and I sure got to hand it to you for producing a real magazine. It got me so steamed up about horses I wanted to go out and get one right away. But the Doc up here says it's no soap. No horses, he says, until the old bean is all in a piece. So I got to take it out in reading. And there ain't a better place for that than in your good old magazine.

How about it, Editor? Do you think you can get some "hoss thief" to drop me a line. Some waddie what's just laid his hand on a real animal he wants to swap for a no-good car. If so tell him to write. Or if there's a couple of girls (and they don't need no horses) who want to cheer up a feller with a big hole in his konk tell them to write. They better be somewheres around twenty-five because that's what I am. I ain't such a good looking mug. But I guess they wouldn't mind that in a letter. I'm about five feet eight including the hole, and weighed about one-fifty pounds before they brought me in here. Also I used to have sandy hair before they shaved it all off. I guess I'm a pretty sight. The nurses all have a laugh every time they come into the ward.

How about it, folks. You going to write a letter?

Yours for stronger skulls,
Carlos.

P. S. You better send the letters to my home. I might be out soon.

Carl Sheridan,
9 Gracie Square,
New York City.

THE OPEN ROAD

THE MEN WHO went West with the great tides of immigration, and the men who went North from Texas with the cattle herds were a hard-bitten nomadic lot. They were, for the most part, adventurers, men always on the move, men whose lives were based on action. They had little time to settle down in one place, and they had less inclination to grow old and stiff surrounded by the same scenery. But now and then one of these young cowmen would meet a girl. And . . .

Maybe he'd decide that he liked the town, or the mountains, or the river. Or maybe he'd just make up his mind that he wanted to hang around for a spell. And then, first thing he knew he'd have a job on some ranch near by—or he'd sink his stake in a little spread back there where the grass looked greener than any grass he'd ever seen before. During the winter he'd snake down pine logs from the hills and start notching them up for a house. And when the Chinook came and the grass and flowers started in growing again he'd have his new home pretty well underway.

Then some bright morning, or some warm evening he would ride out that way. Beside him, sitting side-saddle, would be the young lady. They wouldn't talk much on their ride but would give themselves up to the movement of their horses and the joy of being young and alive. The man would stop when they came to the clearing with the newly-peeled logs. But the girl, as usual, would speak first.

"That's a trim little house," she'd say. "And that spring, isn't it lovely down there below the hill with the alders and the willows. And. . . ."

Maybe the man would get up courage enough to break in now. "Sure, it's a good spring. But—" and the chances are his hat would be in his hand—"I ain't moved into the house yet. It's too big for one feller." He would be looking over at the girl who was sitting her saddle next to him. "An' kind of lonely-like," he'd say.

And before either of them knew just what was happening they would be making plans.

That's the way many a household started back there in the old West. And many a town grew from these little clusters of homes. When the young man and young woman were getting on in years, when their children began arriving, they had to start schools. A solid civilization grew up where the Indians had roamed.

It was the women who founded the

West, not the men. It was the women who made homes for the men, who showed that life in one place wasn't always dull, and was always more satisfying than the life of the nomad. The women were the ones who gave a solidity to that shifting civilization.

This story is always interesting, the story of two young people making their homes in the wilderness. Sometimes it lacks the flash of the more exciting tale—but almost always it is more lasting in the memory. It is a story that is close to the hearts of all of us, a story of work and play, of companionship and love. It is a story that the *Rangeland Romances* authors delight to write—and we will have many of them in the issues to come.

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